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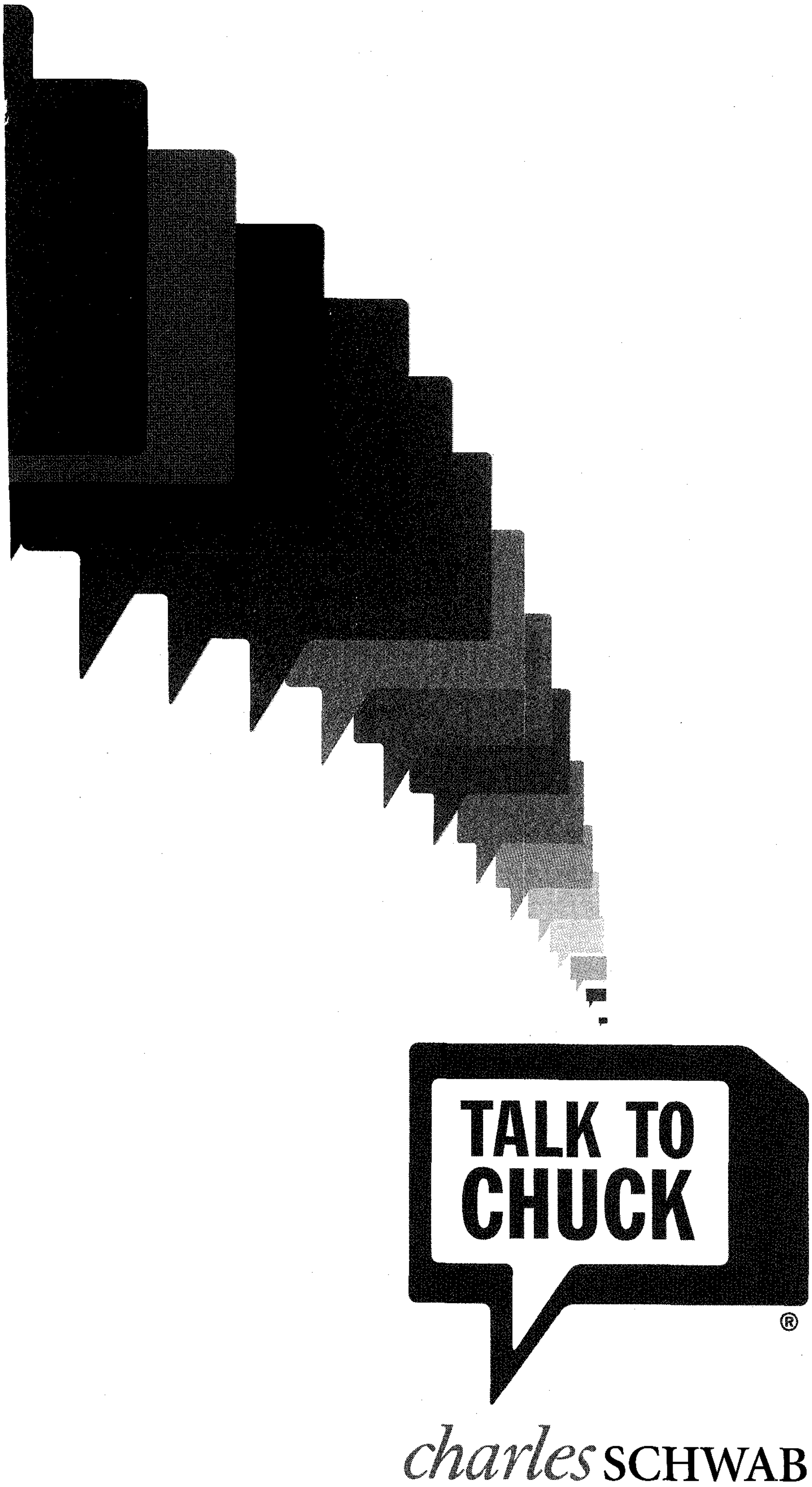
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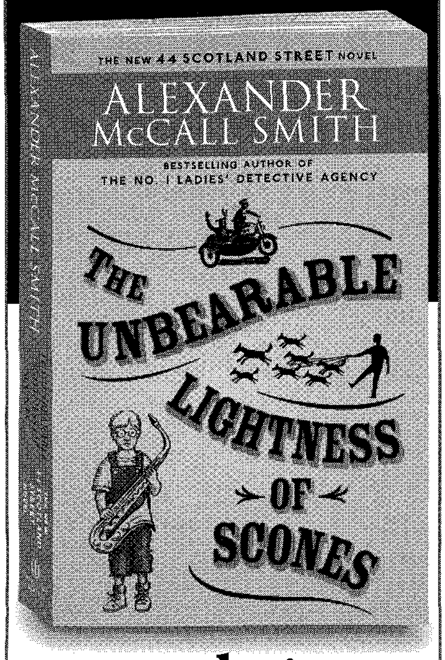
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JANUARY 18, 2010

6 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

19 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Steve Coll on Obama and terrorism; the America Bowl; Pee-wee redux.

Malcolm Gladwell 24 ANNALS OF BUSINESS
The Sure Thing
The myth of the daredevil entrepreneur.

Woody Allen 30 SHOUTS & MURMURS
Udder Madness

Amanda Fortini 32 THE WORLD OF FASHION
Twisted Sisters
Rodarte's avant-garde approach.

Margaret Talbot 40 A REPORTER AT LARGE
A Risky Proposal
Will a new legal strategy help gay marriage?

Calvin Tomkins 52 PROFILES
Lines of Resistance
The art of William Kentridge.

T. Coraghessan Boyle 60 FICTION
"A Death in Kitchawank"

THE CRITICS

Nancy Franklin 70 ON TELEVISION
"Jersey Shore."

BOOKS

Claudia Roth Pierpont 74 *Novels from the Arab world.*
81 Briefly Noted

David Denby 82 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"The Book of Eli," "Fish Tank."

POEMS

Mary Karr 48 "Illiterate Progenitor"
Galway Kinnell 79 "Turkeys"

COVER *"Great Expectations," by Frank Viva* DRAWINGS *Emily Flake, Barbara Smaller, Mick Stevens, Joe Dator, Leo Cullum, Gahan Wilson, Charles Barsotti, Farley Katz, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Roz Chast, Drew Dernavich, P. C. Vey* SPOTS *Javier Mariscal*

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CONTRIBUTORS

Malcolm Gladwell ("The Sure Thing," p. 24) published his fourth book, "What the Dog Saw," in October.

Steve Coll (Comment, p. 19), the president of the New America Foundation, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2005 for his book "Ghost Wars," about the C.I.A. and Afghanistan.

Calvin Trillin (The Talk of the Town, p. 23) has been writing for the magazine since 1963. His most recent book is "Deciding the Next Decider: The 2008 Presidential Race in Rhyme."

Woody Allen (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 30) has been a contributor to the magazine for many years.

Amanda Fortini ("Twisted Sisters," p. 32) is a writer living in Los Angeles.

Nan Goldin (Photograph, p. 33) has a new exhibition showing at the Rebecca Camhi Gallery, in Athens, in February and March. Another exhibition of her work will open at the Louvre in November.

Mary Karr (Poem, p. 48) teaches English at Syracuse University. Her recent books include the memoir "Lit" and the collection of poems "Sinners Welcome."

Margaret Talbot ("A Risky Proposal," p. 40) has been a staff writer since 2004.

Calvin Tomkins ("Lines of Resistance," p. 52) writes about art and cultural affairs for the magazine. "Lives of the Artists," a collection of *New Yorker* Profiles, just came out in paperback.

T. Coraghessan Boyle (Fiction, p. 60) has published eight collections of short stories and twelve novels. A new collection, "Wild Child and Other Stories," comes out later this month.

Claudia Roth Pierpont (Books, p. 74) is the author of "Passionate Minds," a book of essays about women writers.

Galway Kinnell (Poem, p. 79) was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for "Selected Poems." His other poetry collections include "Strong Is Your Hold" and "Imperfect Thirst."

David Denby (The Current Cinema, p. 82) has published three books, including "American Sucker" and "Snark."

Frank Viva (Cover) is an artist and designer who lives in Toronto. His first children's picture book, "Along a Long Road," will be published in Canada later this year.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

Margaret Talbot posts all week about Perry v. Schwarzenegger, and chats live with readers about gay marriage and the Supreme Court. / A live chat with *Steve Coll* about this week's Comment. / Audio: *John Cassidy* and *Ryan Lizza* on the economy and the midterm elections; *Claudia Roth Pierpont* on the Arabic novel; *Karen Russell* reads a Carson McCullers story. / Video: DVD of the Week; Finger Painting by *Jorge Colombo*. / Blogs: *Amy Davidson's* Close Read, *Evan Osnos* on China, *Macy Halford* on books, and more. / The Cartoon Kit, the caption contest, and a complete archive of issues, back to 1925.

THE MAIL

MEETING KOESTLER

According to Louis Menand's review of Michael Scammell's new biography of Arthur Koestler, I converted Koestler to Communism in Berlin in 1931 (A Critic at Large, December 21st & 28th). This is silly. I was never a Communist, and never encouraged Koestler (or anyone else) to become one, or to "lurch to the left." I worked in Russia, and in many other countries, but I was apolitical. My arrest in Russia, in 1936, for "conspiring to kill Stalin," was a trumped-up charge, as were many arrests during the Stalin purges.

Eva Striker Zeisel
New York City

BODY LANGUAGE

As a long-time Chaucer scholar, I was delighted by Joan Acocella's appreciation of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" and her review of a new translation (Books, December 21st & 28th). However, the Miller's Tale does not describe "an act of involuntary cunnilingus." Acocella may read the event the way she does because Chaucer tells us that, upon kissing Alison, Absolon felt something like a beard. However, Chaucer is very specific about the placement of the kiss: he "kiste hir naked ers" (i.e., kissed her naked ass). He had other words to use for naming her sexual organ, including "queynte," "bele chose," "quoniam," and "chambre of Venus" (all used by the Wife of Bath).

Saul Brody
Professor Emeritus of English
The City College of New York
New York City

PRODUCT PLACEMENT

James Surowiecki, in writing about Tiger Woods, states that "by most accounts" athletes started endorsing products in 1905, when Honus Wagner put his name on the Louisville Slugger baseball bat (The Financial Page, December 21st & 28th). Professional and amateur cyclists had been endorsing products for at least a decade before that. In 1894, for example, my great-grandaunt, Annie Kopchovsky, carried a placard advertising Londonderry Lithia Spring Water on the first of two bicycles she used in an around-the-world bicycle trip, and the company used her image in at least one newspaper ad in Denver when she passed through, the following year. Indeed, she travelled under the name Annie Londonderry and also appeared in advertisements for Sterling bicycles, the brand of the second bike she used on the journey. And she wasn't the only Annie to endorse Sterling cycles: Annie Oakley, the sharpshooter, did as well.

Peter Zheutlin
Needham, Mass.

ON IMMIGRATION

One possible origin of tensions between the Dutch and their Muslim immigrant population, which Ian Buruma describes, may be due not so much to a divide between cultures as to a divide between generations ("Parade's End," December 7th). First-generation immigrants have exercised an option for improving their condition: by taking low-status jobs in a wealthy nation, they hope to become, relative to their original community, successful. Their children, on the other hand, born into citizenship in a wealthy nation, often see only the disparity between their community's impoverished isolation and the cosmopolitan wealth of their host nation. The low-paying jobs that their parents embraced become for them a stigma. And, unlike their parents, they have no ready options to emigrate elsewhere in pursuit of a better life. The Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands show that it is relatively easy for the working poor to escape from a poor nation but not so easy to escape from a rich one.

Jeff Weiss
Hickory Corners, Mich.

•

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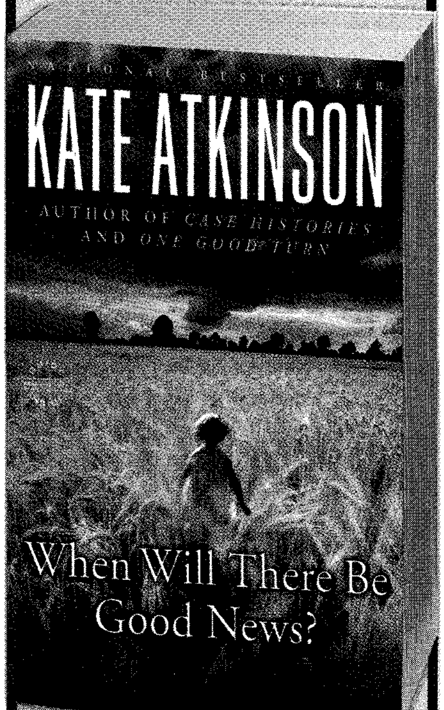
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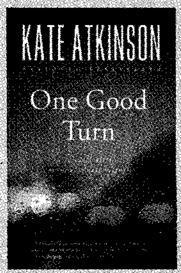

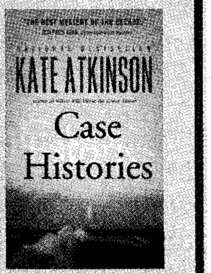

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"John Cassavetes' Husbands," part of the "Under the Radar" festival at the Public. Photograph by Gus Powell.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
17	18	19	13	14	15	16

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
UNDER THE BRIDGE

Sam Mendes, who has been busy on the big screen lately (he directed "Revolutionary Road" in 2008, and "Away We Go" last year), returns to the Brooklyn Academy of Music with his Bridge Project to present Shakespeare's "As You Like It," which will play for a month before running in repertory with "The Tempest" (which opens in February). The cast includes Stephen Dillane, Alvin Epstein, Thomas Sadoski, Michelle Beck, and Juliet Rylance. (See page 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
TIMELY SOUNDS

Charlie Hunter's new album, "Gentlemen, I Neglected to Inform You You Will Not Be Getting Paid," has just been released, and the prolific jazz-funk guitarist is at Rose Live Music on Tuesdays through the end of the month playing his tuneful meditations on hard times. (See page 10.)

ART
SOLID GEOMETRY

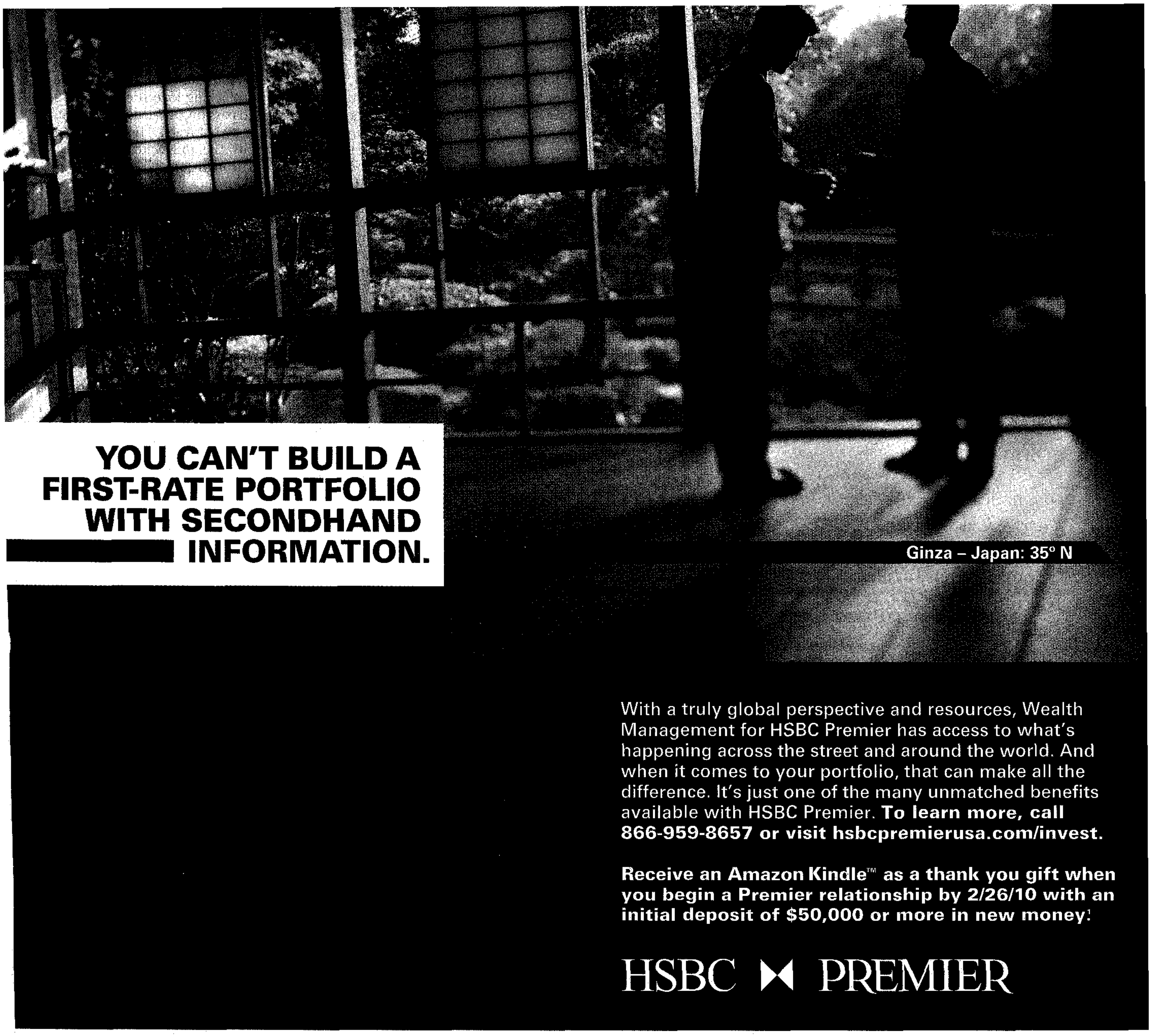
He was one of the first Abstract Expressionists, who counted Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline as close friends, but the New York painter Roy Newell (1914-2006) rarely exhibited in his lifetime. Instead, he worked and reworked the same small, bright geometric abstractions for decades. A selection is on view at Nitsch, in Chelsea. (See page 12.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
LONG RUN

Aaron Jay Kernis established himself as a major neo-Romantic composer with a series of masterly pieces in the nineteen-nineties. Now fifty, he gets a well-deserved tribute this week at (Le) Poisson Rouge. (See page 14.)

MOVIES
STARS OF DAVID

Works of fiction come to the fore at this year's edition of the Jewish Film Festival, at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, including "Ajami," a drama set in a multiethnic Israeli neighborhood; "Eyes Wide Open," about an ultra-Orthodox butcher in Jerusalem who faces his homosexual desires; and "Protector," a period piece set in Nazi-occupied Prague. (See page 16.)



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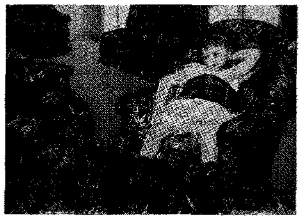

MARY CASSATT, "LITTLE GIRL IN A BLUE ARMCHAIR" (1978), NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.

If the title of the Met's "American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765-1915" suggests a unit in social studies, that's apt. The survey of more than a hundred pictures flogs themes of national history and, well, "character." Pedagogical wall texts loom. But be alerted: this is a great show. It brings to town cream-of-the-cream loans of Charles Willson Peale, George Caleb Bingham, John Singer Sargent, Thomas Eakins, William Merritt Chase, George Bellows, et al. It's about art, beyond illustration. The curators emphasize artists' first-hand experience ("original—not adapted—screenplays," they explain) in their four-part lesson plan: enhanced portraiture, until 1830; popular genre, until 1860; the Civil War and its aftermath, until 1877; and then blooming cosmopolitanism. Pictures that jump off the wall range from John Singleton Copley's "Paul Revere" and Winslow Homer's "Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)" to Mary Cassatt's "Little Girl in a Blue Armchair" and Frederic Remington's tour de force, "Fight for the Water Hole." You may find yourself reading text labels greedily, for once, to get in on the episodes of sensibility that sprung such fine surprises on a nation still rawly young.

—*Peter Schjeldahl*

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

AGES OF THE MOON
Two men, longtime friends and rivals, are the focus of Sam Shepard's play, which originated at the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin. Stephen Rea and Sean McGinley, for whom the roles were written, star; Jimmy Fay directs. In previews. (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 212-279-4200.)

AS YOU LIKE IT
At BAM, the Bridge Project presents the Shakespeare comedy, starring Alvin Epstein, Stephen Dillane, Christian Camargo, Ron Cephas Jones, Thomas Sadoski, Michelle Beck, and Juliet Rylance. Sam Mendes directs. In previews. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

LEAR
Young Jean Lee wrote and directs her take on "King Lear," which focusses on the daughters of the king. With choreography by Dean Moss. In previews. Opens Jan. 14. (SoHo Rep, 46 Walker St. 212-352-3101.)

THE MAN IN ROOM 306
Craig Alan Edwards wrote and stars in this portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr., set in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination. Cheryl Katz directs. Previews begin Jan. 15. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

THE ORPHANS' HOME CYCLE, PART 3
Michael Wilson directs the third part of Horton Foote's trilogy (in repertory with Parts 1 and 2), based on the playwright's father's life in Texas, produced by Hartford Stage and Signature Theatre Company. In previews. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

PRESENT LAUGHTER
Victor Garber stars in Noël Coward's farce, about a British actor preparing for a trip to Africa. Nicholas Martin directs, for the Roundabout Theatre Company. In previews. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

ROUGH SKETCH
Rude Mechanicals Theatre Company presents a play by Shawn Nacol, directed by Ian Morgan, about two children's-movie animators who experience a creative crisis. Previews begin Jan. 14. Opens Jan. 17. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

SEXUAL HEALING
Jonathan Leaf wrote and directs this play, about a scientific researcher who studies sexual dysfunction in couples. Opens Jan. 13. (Theatre 3 at the Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-868-4444.)

TIME STANDS STILL
In Donald Margulies's new play, a journalist and a photographer who thrive on their dangerous work are forced by injuries to settle down in New York. Laura Linney, Alicia Silverstone, Brian d'Arcy James, and Eric Bogosian star in the Manhattan Theatre Club production. Daniel Sullivan directs. In previews. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

VENUS IN FUR
David Ives's new play, based on Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's erotic novel, set at a theatrical audition. Walter Bobbie directs. In previews. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE
Liev Schreiber and Scarlett Johansson star in Arthur Miller's 1955 drama, directed by Gregory Mosher, about a Brooklyn dockworker who is obsessed with his seventeen-year-old niece. In previews. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

AUNT LEAF
Barbara Wiechmann wrote this play, a dark fairy tale set in the Hudson River Valley. Jeffrey Mousseau directs. (HERE Arts Center, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101.)

BRIEF ENCOUNTER
Cornwall's Kneehigh Theatre brings its dizzily inventive staging of David Lean's 1946 film, based on Noël Coward's play "Still Life," to St. Ann's Warehouse. A British housewife (Hannah Yelland) and a handsome doctor (Tristan Sturrock) meet at a train station and dive into a bittersweet affair—one that is less about sex than about love and liberation. Using every bit of stagecraft at her disposal, the director, Emma Rice, doesn't so much deconstruct the original source as layer it with tactile pleasures. On occasion, actors teleport onto a black-and-white screen, or erupt into rollicking love songs. And, in moments of suppressed passion, projections of ocean waves wash over the two lovers. The result is a high-tech study in heartache. (38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. Through Jan. 17.)

COIL
P.S. 122 presents its annual festival of contemporary performing arts, including works by Richard Maxwell ("Ads"), Morgan Thorson and Low ("Heaven"), and Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl with Emily Johnson ("Terrible Things"). (First Ave. at 9th St. 212-352-3101.)

CULTUREMART 2010
A three-week festival showcasing artists from the HERE Arts Center residencies, featuring theatre, dance, music, puppetry, and visual art. (145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101.)

FELA!
This musical, directed by Bill T. Jones, tells the life story of Fela Kuti, the father of Afrobeat and, in the nineteen-seventies, one of the most popular musicians in West Africa. Like all after-stories of beloved leaders, the musical's account of Fela has notable omissions, especially regarding his religious and sexual politics. But there are two great things in the show: one is Sahr Ngaujah, the man who, for most of the week, plays Fela. How did the producers find a performer who matches Fela in charm, wit, and insolence? Ngaujah is a thrilling actor, with enough moods and tones and nuances that you have no trouble listening to him for more than two hours straight. The second glory of "Fela!" is the dancing, created by Jones. It's hard to make West African dance look bad, but oh how good Jones and the dancers, more than half of them American-born (the others are African or Caribbean), have made it look. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/7/09.) (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

LITTLE GEM
The winner of the Carol Tambor Best of Edinburgh Award, written by Elaine Murphy and directed by Paul Meade, centers on the adventures of three generations of women in Dublin. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101. Through Jan. 16.)

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC
In this revival of the 1973 show, Stephen Sondheim's beautiful score remains the true star. Gentle, coaxing, and insinuating, the music is audience-friendly, with only hints of the composer's characteristic shadows. Based on Ingmar Bergman's 1955 romp, "Smiles of a Summer Night," the story focusses on a nineteenth-century actress named Desirée Armfeldt (Catherine Zeta-Jones, making her Broadway début), whose games eventually involve her two lovers, their wives, her daughter, and her mother, Madame Armfeldt (Angela Lansbury). The two-act farce (with some drama) has a serviceable book by Hugh Wheeler; he gives the actors enough to do, but it's strange to watch them do it in such poor surroundings. The décor, such as it is, is by David Farley, and one only wonders if the show's director, Trevor Nunn, was trying to emulate John Doyle's minimalist take on previous Sondheim shows by practically stripping the stage bare. But Doyle's approach to Sondheim was conceptually rich, whereas Nunn's actors seem cramped. Though Zeta-Jones appears to be enjoying herself up there, she's self-conscious, and her elocution—which falls somewhere between her native Wales and Beverly Hills—sometimes strangles Sondheim's lyrics in mid-flight; Lansbury hams it up without even trying. The real revelation here is Alexander Hanson, who plays a lawyer named Fredrik Egerman. He's sexy because he's self-assured, and has a sense of humor. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

NEW YORK GILBERT & SULLIVAN PLAYERS
Productions mounted for the company's annual encampment at City Center include "The Mikado," "The Pirates of Penzance," "H.M.S. Pinafore," and, new this year, "Ruddigore." (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through Jan. 17.)

ROMEO AND JULIET
Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's fundamentally ironic piece is an essay masquerading as a spectacle about America's indifference to dramatic literature, Shakespeare, and theatre itself. Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper, the husband-and-wife team who co-conceive and co-direct most of the pieces for the New York-based avant-garde company, asked a number of friends and performers to recount what they could remember of the story of "Romeo and Juliet." The responses form the text: a series of amusingly garbled monologues spoken by two performers, Anne Gridley and Robert M. Johanson. On one level, it's about love and show biz and the sadness at the center of both; the piece is also, inevitably, about language. How do we speak poetry—which is metalanguage—in a culture in which the primary means of communication is visual? Watching Johanson, one wonders if Liska and Copper's interest in this kind of sophomoric male character, with his exaggerated sense of entitlement, diminishes their project—while pandering to European audiences, who may still believe that the New World is, culturally speaking, filled with rubes. (1/11/10) (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. Through Jan. 16.)

SMUDGE
Rachel Axler ("Parks & Recreation," "The Daily Show") wrote this dark comedy, about a woman who gives birth to a smudge. Pam MacKinnon directs the Women's Project production. (Julia Miles, 424 W. 55th St. 212-239-6200.)

UNDER THE RADAR
The Public's annual festival of up-and-coming artists from around the world returns for its sixth year. Highlights include the National Theatre of the United States of America's "CHAUTAUQUA!"; Seán Millar's "Silver Stars"; and works based on John Cassavetes's "Husbands" and Haruki Murakami's "Wind-Up Bird Chronicle." (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through Jan. 17.)

Also Playing

AVENUE Q: New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BYE BYE BIRDIE:** Henry Miller, 124 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION:** Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **THE EMPEROR JONES:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **ERNEST IN LOVE:** Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. **FINIAN'S RAINBOW:** St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 17. **GOD OF CARNAGE:** Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE-ROCK MUSICAL:** Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-307-4100. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **LOVE, LOSS, AND WHAT I WORE:** Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **MEMPHIS:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **MISALLIANCE:** City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **NEXT TO NORMAL:** Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **OUR TOWN:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444. **RACE:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **ROCK OF AGES:** Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **THE UNDERSTUDY:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. Through Jan. 17. **WEST SIDE STORY:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-239-6200. **WISHFUL DRINKING:** Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300. Through Jan. 17. **ZERO HOUR:** Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Jan. 17: **Pentagram** is an ever-shifting heavy-metal collective from Virginia that has always travelled under the mainstream radar. They started with a psychedelic sound in the early seventies, before embracing a grim aesthetic that influenced contemporary subgenres like doom metal and stoner metal.

THE BELL HOUSE
149 7th St., between Second and Third Aves., Brooklyn (718-643-6510)—Jan. 18: The enchanting singer-songwriter **Beth Orton.**

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Jan. 13: Considering that they played their first show ever back in May at the Cake Shop, the Florida indie heartthrobs the **Drums** have been riding a remarkable wave of buzz over the past nine months. They're here to showcase their iridescent blend of surf music and melancholy post-punk. Opening the show are their friends in **Surfer Blood;** they've only been a band for eight months, but John Paul Pitts, the twenty-three-year-old lead singer, has already decided to drop out of Florida Atlantic University to bring his blissed-out power pop to the masses. Jan. 18: With the release of his eagerly anticipated new record, "Heartland," the Canadian violinist **Owen Pallett** has discontinued the use of Final Fantasy as the name of his solo act. It's just as well, frankly; somehow a Nintendo-game reference didn't do justice to the seriousness of Pallett's work in orchestral pop. The new album, a collaborative concept record about an imagined farmer named Lewis and featuring the downtown composer Nico Muhly, the Arcade Fire drummer, Jeremy Gara, and the entire Czech Symphony Orchestra, attests to his grand ambitions.

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Jan. 16. Yorkshire's budding indie-rock all-stars the **Cribs** upped the ante when the three Jarman brothers introduced the former Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr into the group, in 2008. The new lineup's latest release, "Ignore the Ignorant," has been chalking up Album of the Year ratings in some of England's and Japan's biggest music magazines. The solo artist and former Moldy Peaches member **Adam Green** continues to deliver indelicate lyrics packaged in smooth croons and performed with drunken energy. His forthcoming album is called "Minor Love." With Portland's **Dead Trees.**

HIGHLINE BALLROOM
431 W. 16th St. (212-414-5994)—Jan. 15: The longtime alternative-rock eccentric David Lowery spent the eighties at the head of the stylistically shambolic outfit **Camper Van Beethoven,** crafting oddball hits like "Take the Skinheads Bowling." After officially dissolving the band, in 1990, Lowery formed the more conventional **Cracker,** inching ever closer to mainstream accessibility with less unwieldy (though no less smarmy) slightly countrified power pop. Cracker plays on (having released its latest album, "Sunrise in the Land of Milk & Honey," last year), and Lowery has periodically re-formed Camper Van Beethoven for the odd tour and even odder album (including a note-for-note cover of Fleetwood Mac's "Tusk," in 2002). This evening, Lowery brings both bands to the same stage.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Jan. 13: **Kris Delmhorst,** who grew up in New York, is a prolific folk songwriter blessed with a deeply soulful voice. Her husband, **Jeffrey Foucault,** sings stark, literate songs that are as wide open as the landscape of his native Midwest. Jan. 16: The **Snow,** a lush indie-pop quintet led by the Franco-American troubadour Pierre de Gaillande, celebrates the release of its sophomore recording, "I Die Every Night." De Gaillande, a long-standing fixture of the New York scene, is an unabashed fan of melody and songwriting crafts-

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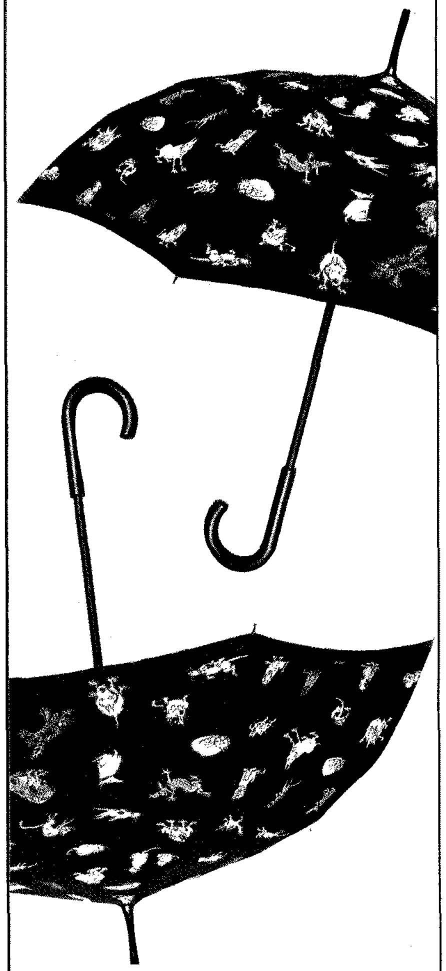

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manship, and his gifts in those departments are on ample display on the record. He sings in a clear, unadorned style that's nicely complemented by the angelic voice of Hilary Downes, who doubles on various keyboard instruments. The music, arranged with a moderate degree of exactitude, merges rock with hints of cabaret and is executed with precision by the veterans David Spinley, on clarinet, Christian Bongers, on bass, and Jeff Schaeffer, on drums. **Lucinda Black Bear,** a like-minded quintet with yearning vocals and moody tempos, opens.

MONSTER ISLAND BASEMENT
128 River St., at Metropolitan Ave., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (No phone)—Jan. 16: **Silk Flowers** and **Led Er Est** play this raw subterranean space, a fitting venue for each band's downbeat and dejected synth pop. Don't underestimate the ability of these crestfallen anthems to make the black-turtleneck crowd dance.

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG
66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—Jan. 15. The tribal-psychedelic art band **Gang Gang Dance.** Heavy on percussion and electronic sounds, the four-piece outfit relies largely on traditional rock instruments (albeit channelled through laptops, samplers, synthesizers, and pedals) to create a refreshingly live and free-form improvisatory sound. With **DJ/Rupture,** the pseudonym of Jace Clayton, a versatile d.j., producer, writer, and blogger in New York who runs the independent label Soot Records and was once the turntable soloist in the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra.

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—Jan. 15: **Rosanne Cash,** whose latest album, "The List," is a collection of country songs recommended to her by her father when she was a teen-ager, performs an acoustic show.

TERMINAL 5
610 W. 56th St. (212-582-6600)—Jan. 14-15: As lead singer of the Strokes, **Julian Casablancas** struck an influential chord at the beginning of this decade as a scruffy savior of downtown cool, reinvigorating New York City's hipster cachet and making taut, catchy guitar rock relevant again. Nine years after the band's recording début, Casablancas has released his first solo album, "Phrazes for the Young," an ambitious effort that eschews the Strokes' hooks in favor of adventurous forays into other styles and instrumentation.

Julian Casablancas plays two nights at Terminal 5.

PUNY

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE
The Tobago native **Calypso Rose** (born McCartha Lewis) started singing in the fifties, when she was a teen-ager, and became, in 1978, the first woman to be crowned the Calypso Monarch (in an annual competition in which the winner was previously called the Calypso King). Her 1966 composition "Fire in Me Wire" is an international anthem. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536. Jan. 15.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

"AMERICAN SONGBOOK"
Jan. 13: The rock-and-roll survivor **Marianne Faithfull.** Jan. 15: **David Hidalgo and Louie Perez,** founding members of the great American band Los Lobos, began writing songs together as students at Garfield High School, in East L.A., in the early seventies. Here, they'll discuss and demonstrate their creative process, take questions from the audience, and perform acoustic versions of their very earliest collaborations. Jan. 16: The versatile actress **Martha Plimpton** tries her hand at popular songs. (Allen Room, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. Through March 6.)

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Jan. 12-16: The singer **Jane Monheit** has survived the tsunami-like hype that followed her début album, "Never Never Land," a decade ago, and has established herself as a dependable presence on the vocal jazz scene.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Jan. 12-17: **Joe Sample** is a pianist who has long straddled the borders of mainstream jazz and R. & B.-influenced pop.

FESTIVAL OF NEW TRUMPET MUSIC
Specific in its concentrated gaze yet farsighted in scope, this annual gathering features appearances by, among others, **Wilmer Wise** and **Lew Soloff, Rob Mazurek, Dave Ballou, Taylor Ho Bynum,** and **Dave Douglas.** (Abrons Arts Center, Henry Street Settlement, 466 Grand St. 212-598-0400. For more information, visit www.fontmusic.org. Jan. 13-16.)

HIGHLINE BALLROOM
431 W. 16th St. (212-414-5994)—Jan. 14: The pianist **Brad Mehldau,** equally at home in group settings or as an expansive solo improviser, goes it alone here.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Jan. 14-17: With his organ trio, the guitarist **John Abercrombie** reaches back to his roots without losing his exploratory vision. The saxophonist **Greg Osby** sits in as a guest soloist.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Jan. 12-14: **David Gilmore** and Numerology. Not to be confused with the similarly bold guitarist from Pink Floyd, Gilmore is a venturesome jazz musician. His all-star ensemble includes the vocalist **Claudia Acuña,** the saxophonist **Miguel Zenon,** the bassist **Christian McBride,** and the drummer **Jeff (Tain) Watts.** Jan. 15-17: The **George Coleman** quartet. The stirring mainstream saxophonist Coleman, whose sterling résumé includes work with Max Roach and Miles Davis, is joined by his longtime partner, the pianist **Harold Mabern.**

THE KITANO NEW YORK
66 Park Ave., at 38th St. (212-885-7119)—Jan. 14: **Nicki Parrott,** a marvellous bassist, charming singer, and mainstay of the still active Les Paul trio, leads her own threesome.

ROSE LIVE MUSIC
345 Grand St., Brooklyn (718-599-0069)—Having recently released a wonderfully titled new album, "Gentlemen, I Neglected to Inform You You Will Not Be Getting Paid," the guitarist **Charlie Hunter** settles in for a residency on Tuesdays in January. Calling on a feisty brass section and indulging his love of jazz, R. & B., and blues, Hunter has produced an unashamedly groovy album that combines his own snaky virtuosity with sharp songcraft. The drummer **Eric Kalb** and the trombonist **Curtis Fowlkes,** both featured on "Gentlemen," will join him here.

SYMPHONY SPACE
Chick Corea is as influential as he is eclectic in his musical interests. The pianist, composer, and bandleader has been a major force in jazz since the late sixties. A sizable group of players, including **Geoffrey Keezer,** the **Harlem String Quartet,** and the longtime Corea collaborator **Gary Burton,** pay tribute to him. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Jan 16.)

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Jan. 12-17: The pianist **Fred Hersch's** trio features his longtime associate **Drew Gress,** on bass, and the wily, eccentric **Paul Motian,** on drums.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765-1915."** Through Jan. 24. ♦ **"Velázquez Rediscovered."** Through Feb. 7. ♦ **"Sounding the Pacific: Musical Instruments of Oceania."** Through Sept. 6. ♦ **"Peaceful Conquerors: Jain Manuscript Painting."** Through March 21. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Gabriel Orozco."** Through March 1. ♦ **"Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity."** Through Jan. 25. ♦ **"Tim Burton."** Through April 26. ♦ **"Monet's Water Lilies."** Through April 12. ♦ **"Performance 7: Mirage by Joan Jonas."** Through May 31. ♦ **"The New Typography."** Through July 12. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Anish Kapoor: Memory."** Through March 28. (Open Fridays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Saturday evenings until 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"Roni Horn aka Roni Horn."** Through Jan. 24. ♦ **"Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction."** Through Jan. 17. ♦ **"Omer Fast: Nostalgia."** Complex, disturbing, and at times even funny, Fast's three-video cycle hinges

on a fractured narrative about a former child soldier from Nigeria seeking political asylum in England. The tale of politics and dislocation is loosely connected by the recurring image of a partridge trap made of sticks, a metaphor, perhaps, for the refugee's predicament. The scenarios grow stranger and more fantastic; soon, an Englishman is explaining to an African policewoman why he is seeking asylum from Surrey. The work's brutal climax may prove too hard to watch for some viewers. Nevertheless, Fast's Gordian knot of dystopic plotlines and personas is a virtuosic turn. Through Feb. 14. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Who Shot Rock & Roll: A Photographic History, 1955 to the Present."** Through Jan. 31. ♦ **"James Tissot: 'The Life of Christ.'"** Through Jan. 17. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Traveling the Silk Road: Ancient Pathway to the Modern World."** Through Aug. 15. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM
45 W. 53rd St. (212-265-1040)—**"Up Close: Henry Darger and the Coloring Book."** Through Sept. 13. ♦ **"Thomas Chambers (1808-1869): American Marine and Landscape Painter."** Through March 7. ♦ **"Approaching Abstraction."** Through Sept. 6. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 7:30.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Exuberant Grotesques: Renaissance Maiolica from the Fontana Workshop."** Through Jan. 17. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

GREY ART GALLERY
100 Washington Sq. E. (212-998-6780)—**"Downtown Pix: Mining the Fales Archives, 1961-1991."** Through April 3. (Open Tuesdays through Fridays, 11 to 6, Saturdays, 11 to 5, and Wednesday evenings until 8.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—**"Dress Codes: The Third ICP Triennial of Photography and Video."** Through Jan. 17. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

JAPAN SOCIETY
333 E. 47th St. (212-832-1155)—**"Serizawa: Master of Japanese Textile Design."** Through Jan. 17. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays, 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—**"Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention."** Through March 14. ♦ **"Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life."** Through Feb. 7. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, 11 to 5:45, Thursdays, 11 to 8, and Fridays, 11 to 4.)

MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"A Woman's Wit: Jane Austen's Life and Legacy."** Through March 14. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEO DEL BARRIO
Fifth Ave. at 104th St. (212-831-7272)—**"Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis."** Through Feb. 28. ♦ **"Voces y Visiones: Four Decades Through El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection."** Through Feb. 28. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 5.)

MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN
2 Columbus Circle (212-299-7777)—**"Read My Pins: The Madeleine Albright Collection."** Through Jan. 31. ♦ **"Slash: Paper Under the Knife."** Through April 4. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—**"Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future."** Through Jan. 31. ♦ **"Legacy: The Preservation of Wilderness in New York City."** Through March 21. ♦ **"Only in New York: Photographs from *Look* Magazine."** Through Jan. 18. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
1 Bowling Green (212-514-3700)—**"A Song for the Horse Nation."** Through July 7. (Open daily, 10 to 5, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

NEW MUSEUM
235 Bowery, at Prince St. (212-219-1222)—**"Urs Fischer: Marguerite de Ponty."** Through Feb. 7. ♦ **"Nikhil Chopra: Yog Raj Chitrakar, Memory Drawing IX."** Through Feb. 14. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**"1969."** Through April 5. ♦ **"Between Spaces."** Through April 5. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART
Flushing Meadows–Corona Park (718-592-9700)—**"Duke Riley: Those About to Die Salute You."** Through March 13. ♦ **"O Zhang: Cutting the Blaze to New Frontiers."** Through March 13. ♦ **"Daniel Bozhkov: Republic of Perpetual Reconstitution and Rebuild."** Through March 13. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, noon to 5.)

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—**"The Red Book of C. G. Jung."** Through Jan. 25. ♦ **"Victorious Ones: Jain Images of Perfection."** Through Feb. 15. (Open Mondays and Thursdays, 11 to 5, Wednesdays, 11 to 7, Fridays, 11 to 10, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

SCULPTURECENTER
44-19 Purves St., Long Island City (718-361-1750)—**"Leopards in the Temple."** Through March 30. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

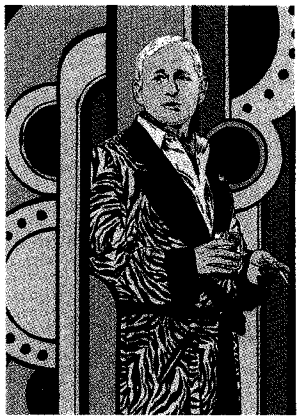
STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"30 Seconds Off an Inch."** Through March 14. ♦ **"Wardell Milan: Drawings of Harlem."** During the year he spent as an artist-in-residence at the museum, Milan took photographs of Harlem and then sketched them. A drawing commission followed, which was published in the museum's *Studio* magazine. More than forty works are on view here, including scenes of shop-windows, churches, and people in the street. They're not half as fascinating as his photographs, which are densely composed and collaged tableaux. But they do exude undeniable charm; the most poignant captures a memorial to Michael Jackson on the marquee of the Apollo Theatre. Homespun and devoid of flashy gimmicks, Milan's works on paper offer the same simple—and considerable—pleasures as a stroll through the streets of New York. Through March 13. ♦ **"A Delicate Touch: Watercolors from the Permanent Collection."** Through March 14. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY
Works in several mediums, including color photography, painting, and drawing, continue Christenberry's ongoing documentation of buildings and landscapes in rural Alabama. The artist's dedication to his subjects—decrepit survivors of the vernacular architecture that previously absorbed Walker Evans—is matched by his affection for them. One remarkable structure is seen collapsing over a period of twenty-seven years, along with the car in its front yard; a scale model of the same house, which Christenberry built from memory, sits on a pedestal nearby. Images from the sixties and seventies, of commercial façades, weathered signs, and gourds hung from a dead tree, hint at his project's larger scope and his rejection of nostalgia in favor of a clear, loving vision. Through Feb. 6. (Pace MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999.)

FRANCIS PICABIA / FAIRFIELD PORTER
The artists have initials in common. What else? Try a mind game. View the arch Dadaist Picabia's stubborn loyalty to painting—in late gawky abstractions, cheesy nudes, and neo-Fauvist landscapes—

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
UNSPOILED VICTOR



As an exceptionally beautiful young man, Victor Garber played Jesus in the film "Godspell" in 1973, where he wore a Superman T-shirt and had a heart painted on his forehead. In the film, Garber's disciples didn't seem crazy, just in thrall to their leader's charisma. He was a new kind of musical star, not macho and aggressive, but soft to the eye and maybe to the touch. Thirty-seven years later, the esteemed stage and television performer (he was a regular on "Alias") has matured into a distinguished older man who could play F.D.R. in a revival of "Sunrise at Campobello." But until some clever producer sets that up, Garber's on view in the current revival of Noël Coward's 1939 comedy, "Present Laughter." Garber plays Garry Essendine, a self-obsessed actor on the verge of a midlife crisis who is trying to shed a number of emotional entanglements even as he takes more on. The part is as far away from what Garber generally projects in his work—decency, compassion, strong support for his female co-stars—as his lovely Jesus, portrayed so long ago.

—*Hilton Als*

RUTH GWILY

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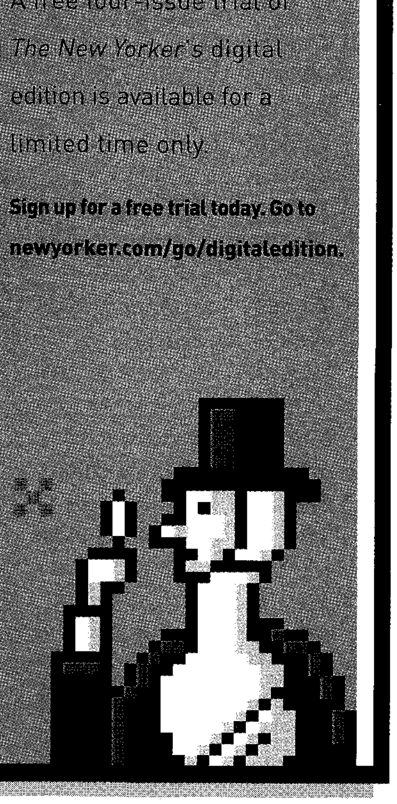


as conservative, though libertine, and the South Hampton realist Porter's eccentric modernism—anti-Cézanne while pro-de Kooning—as radical, though decorous. Both overreached on perverse principle, as when they insisted on painting people, which neither could do worth a nickel. Picabia's rudeness and Porter's lyricism suggest impersonal forces, to which they only usually surrendered. Each assures us, "I don't care what you think." Through Jan. 23. (De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-262-5050.)

MASSIMO VITALI
Vitali is famous for his huge color photographs of Europeans at the beach—landscapes of leisure that are as big as history paintings but a lot more matter-of-fact. No drama, no narrative, just the sand, the sea, and a scattering of people carefully and coolly observed. These summer scenes, from Sicily and Turkey, make Vitali's show a welcome getaway on chilly days. His elevated, omniscient perspective (he usually works from a raised platform) takes the work out of the realm of tourist snaps and closer to that of Thomas Struth, especially in views of ancient sites in Turkey. The images are superb but nothing new for Vitali, who continues to perfect his craft with a minimum of risk and few surprises. Through Feb. 27. (Benrubi, 41 E. 57th St. 212-888-6007.)

Short List

IDA APPLEBROOG: Hauser & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-794-4970. Opens Jan. 19. **JOHN MCLAUGHLIN:** Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444. Through Feb. 13. **STEVE MCQUEEN:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through March 6. **KEITH SONNIER:** Mary Boone, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-752-2929. Through Feb. 6. **CHARLES SELIGER:** Rosenfeld, 24 W. 57th St. 212-247-0082. Through Feb. 27.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

SAUL FLETCHER
There are only eight little photographs in this British photographer's show, but their impact belies their diminutive scale. Fletcher has always worked small, often with unique Polaroid prints, and his images have been dark, introspective, and soulful—odd, allusive tangles of autobiography and myth. Five new pieces in muted color were made using a wall in the artist's studio, where layers of distressed plaster and paint provide an Abstract Expressionist backdrop to constructions of twigs, fabric, and the occasional goat skull or marionette. Symbols of faith and fate are joined by a more playfully sketched bird and dog, as if Fletcher were rebuilding his world from scratch, bit by hard-won bit. Through Jan. 16. (Kern, 532 W. 20th St. 212-367-9663.)

JOSEPHINE HALVORSON
Strikingly tough and tender, small oils merge paint and realness in tight closeups of, among other humble surfaces, a door molding, a wooden shelf, a gravestone, a boarded-up window, part of an organ keyboard, a white dress that might belong to a statue ("Concrete Chest"), and a lick of flame in a woodstove. The canvases are chunky, the compositions blunt, the brushwork sensate, and the colors ticklish (umber, gray-blue, coral). You will look and look, untiring. A young Brooklynite, schooled in Vienna and Paris, Halvorson is a comer. Through Jan. 16. (Rowe, 504 W. 22nd St. 212-255-5065.)

MARTIN WONG
A gallery that helped pioneer the East Village scene in the eighties pays homage to a realist painter who thrived there. (The show was organized by the young artist Adam Putnam.) Wong, who died in 1999 of an AIDS-related illness, made work that was ardent, scrappy, and a little naïve, while also being stringently streetwise. Paintings of constellations have brick-wall-patterned borders, as if the heavens were hemmed in by urban grit. In one circular canvas, an eye in a pyramid hovers above towering tenements. Tattooed musclemen appear on bikes and lounging on beds. Paintings of cactuses marry the mysticism of Georgia O'Keeffe and the sadism of Robert Mapplethorpe, a fellow-poet of roughness and grace. Through Jan. 30. (P.P.O.W, 511 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.)

Short List

DIANE ARBUS / WILLIAM EGGLESTON: Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727. Through Feb. 13. **JOSEPH BEUYS:** Boone, 541 W. 24th St. 212-752-2929. Through Feb. 6. **WILLIAM DANIELS:** Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St. 212-206-9100. Through Feb. 6. **OMER FAST:** Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St. 212-727-3323. Through Feb. 13. **ROY NEWELL:** Nitsch, 534 W. 22nd St. 212-645-2030. Opens Jan. 15. **PHILIP TAAFFE:** Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111. Opens Jan. 16. **ANDY WARHOL:** Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 27th St. 212-563-4474. Through Feb. 6. **"LOOK AGAIN":** Marlborough, 545 W. 25th St. 212-463-8634. Opens Jan. 13. **"PRIMARY ATMOSPHERES: CALIFORNIA MINIMALISM, 1960-1970":** Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070. Through Feb. 6.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

ELLEN VON UNWERTH
Many of von Unwerth's photographs, fashion and otherwise, take place in a casually eroticized world without men, a place where girls just wanna have fun wearing nothing but expensive lingerie. In this show of color and black-and-white work, men appear only as props or toys for women who show a much greater interest in one another—kissing, cuddling, dancing in the nude. Helmut Newton is the obvious precedent here, but von Unwerth's pictures are far more sensuous; she softens Newton's hard edge with a lively sense of fun and a voluptuousness that recalls Lillian Bassman. Her image of a nude dangling a ring of large antique keys in front of her crotch is a teasing take on the chastity belt. Through Jan. 30. (Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-966-6223.)

Short List

CLAIRE FONTAINE: Spaulings, 165 East Broadway. 212-477-5006. Through Jan. 31. **MARIE LORENZ:** Hanley, 136 Watts St. 646-918-6824. Through Jan. 31. **WARDELL MILAN:** Taxter & Spengemann, 123 E. 12th St. 212-924-0212. Through Jan. 23. **YOLA MONAKHOV:** Wolf, 10 Leonard St. 212-925-0025. Opens Jan. 14. **DAVID REED:** Peter Blum, 99 Wooster St. 212-343-0441. Opens Jan. 13. **STANLEY WHITNEY:** Team, 83 Grand St. 212-279-9219. Through Feb. 6. **"ALMOST":** Beauchene, 21 Orchard St. 212-375-8043. Through Jan. 17.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
For his 2007 production of "Romeo + Juliet," Peter Martins reduced the ballet to two acts from the original three, reordered some of Prokofiev's cinematic score, upped the violence, and focussed on the youth, speed, and virtuosity of his dancers. He also commissioned an ungainly set from the Danish artist Per Kirkeby, all bold colors and zigzagging lines. The leads have consistently been younger dancers, most of them excellent, including the newly minted principal Tiler Peck (wonderfully musical), Sterling Hyltin (skittish and impetuous), and the childlike Erica Pereira. Robert Fairchild, also recently promoted, makes a lush and romantic Romeo. Martins may not have captured the poetry and complexities of the story, but there is much to enjoy in such set pieces as the playful mandolin dance for boys from the School of American Ballet in Act II. Casts appear on the company's Web site a week in advance. ♦ Jan. 13 at 7:30, Jan. 15 at 8, Jan. 16 at 2, and Jan. 17 at 3: "Romeo + Juliet." ♦ Jan. 14 at 8: "Naïve and Sentimental Music" and "Who Cares?" ♦ Jan. 16 at 8 and Jan. 19 at 7:30: "Fancy Free," "Prodigal Son," and "Firebird." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through Feb. 28.)

RICHARD ALSTON DANCE COMPANY
At the Joyce, Richard Alston—considered by some to be the finest modern dancemaker the U.K. has ever had—will present his company in a trio of works. Now in his sixties, Alston has been choreographing for four decades, exhibiting great subtlety, lyricism, and musical intelligence; his influences include Frederick Ashton—the father of British ballet—and Merce Cunningham, in whose school he briefly studied. The company will show works set to the music of Philip Glass, Stravinsky ("Petrouchka"), and Hoagy Carmichael. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 12-13 at 7:30, Jan. 14-15 at 8, Jan. 16 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 17 at 2.)

SOLEDAD BARRIO & NOCHE FLAMENCA
The Spanish troupe offers a new piece about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, along with the solos of Antonio Jimenez and Juan Ogalla, and, above all, the *siguiriya* or *soleá* of the incomparable Soledad Barrio. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200. Jan. 12-14 at 8, Jan. 15 at 7 and 10, and Jan. 16 at 5 and 8.)

TRISHA BROWN DANCE COMPANY
Since the sixties, Trisha Brown has been playing with gravity, logic, and different notions of linearity and repetition. Her pieces can be witty, dreamy, at times even dry, but they always speak of a laser-sharp intelligence and a freewheeling spirit. To mark her company's fortieth anniversary, Dance Theatre Workshop will host a series of conversations about her work, beginning with Wendy Perron, a former T.B.D.C. dancer and the current editor of *Dance Magazine*, who will attempt to lift the veil on Brown's creative process with two veteran dancers, Carolyn Lucas and Diane Madden. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Jan. 13 at 7:30.)

RIOULT
Pascal Rioult is the kind of choreographer—ambitious in one sense, cautious in another—who works in "great composer" mode. His two premières this season add to his Bach project, with live music. In "Shadow Box," set to sections of "The Well-Tempered Clavier," the dancers interact with digital versions of themselves, and in "City," set to the Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 6, the video backdrop is urban scenes. "Bolero," which capped off his Ravel Project in 2002, matches the composer's repetitions with a minimalist machine dance. "Harvest," a pastoral out of a Millet painting, was made in 1992, when Rioult was emerging from the Martha Graham Dance Company. The alternate program is more recent—"The Great Mass," last year's quixotic attempt to scale a mountain of Mozart. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 19 at 7:30. Through Jan. 24.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Those who pine for Franco Zeffirelli's luxuriant staging of "Tosca" can content themselves with another of the maestro's popular Puccini productions—that of **"Turandot,"** which the Met dares not discard. The impressive Maria Guleghina, Maija Kovalevska, Salvatore Licitra, and Hao Jiang Tian take the principal roles; Andris Nelsons conducts. (Jan. 13 at 8 and Jan. 16 at 8:30.) ♦ Verdi's **"Stiffelio"** has an important place in Met history. The opera, cut to ribbons by the censors before its première in Trieste in 1850 (like "La Traviata," it had a "modern" plot), was given its first complete performance at the house in 1993. Back then, Plácido Domingo took the title role, that of an Austrian Protestant preacher who struggles with his wife's infidelity; now José Cura sings the lead, with Domingo conducting. Also with the impressive Sondra Radvanovsky, Andrzej Dobber, and Philip Ens. (Jan. 14 at 8.) ♦ With Julianna Di Giacomo replacing Radvanovsky. (Jan. 19 at 8.) ♦ Edo de Waart, replacing James Levine, conducts the final performance of **"Der Rosenkavalier."** The cast—which includes Renée Fleming, Susan Graham, Christine Schäfer, and Kristinn Sigmundsson—could hardly be bettered. (Jan. 15 at 7:30.) ♦ Richard Eyre's new production of **"Carmen,"** set among the revolving walls of a dilapidated bullring in Franco-era Spain, is a daring, sexy replacement for Zeffirelli's disappointing effort from 1996. With her compact but luxuriantly textured voice, Elīna Garanča's Carmen grows increasingly fatalistic as the opera approaches its final confrontation between the untamed Gypsy and her weak-willed lover, Don José (the stylish Roberto Alagna). Also with Barbara Frittoli and Mariusz Kwiecień; the conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, making his Met début, finds the suppleness and heat amid the melodic richness of Bizet's score. (Jan. 16 at 1.) ♦ Plácido Domingo, gradually backing out of the tenor repertory, makes his Met début as a baritone in the title role of **"Simon Boccanegra,"** the mid-career Verdi sleeper that became a later-career success when the composer revised the 1857 original version with the help of the capable Arrigo Boïto. The company has brought in sterling support for his endeavor, with such singers as Adrianne Pieczonka, Marcello Giordani, and James Morris completing the cast and James Levine conducting. (Jan. 18 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

BLEECKER STREET OPERA: "THE BARBER OF SEVILLE"
The hardy, rough-and-ready ethos of the old Amato Opera had its charm, but its limitations became clear as the decades went by. Bleecker Street, one of two companies formed by former Amato personnel, has fostered a more professional standard of performance; its production of Rossini's immortal comedy (sung in Italian) is directed by Teresa K. Pond and conducted by David Rosenmeyer, the associate conductor of the Oratorio Society of New York. (45 Bleecker Street Theatre. 212-239-6200. Jan. 16 at 3 and Jan. 17 at 7.)

GOTHAM CHAMBER OPERA: "IL MONDO DELLA LUNA"
Most of Haydn's operas deserve their obscurity (Mozart had him beat), but this Jules Vernean *dramma giocoso* ("The World on the Moon"), the last of three works he wrote with librettos by Goldoni, surfaces now and then for a fresh hearing. Gotham's is doubtless the most daring production yet: it will be staged at the Hayden Planetarium, in the Rose Center for Earth and Space, with images of the moon and of outer space—courtesy of NASA—projected on the capacious ceiling. The always intrepid Diane Paulus directs; Neal Goren conducts. (American Museum of Natural History, Central Park W. at 79th St. 212-279-4200. Jan. 19 at 7:30. Through Jan. 28.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Prior to their European tour, Alan Gilbert and the orchestra offer three performances of an enticing program at Avery Fisher Hall in which sheer lyrical power invigorates some very serious music. Haydn's Symphony No. 49, "La Passione," is followed by John Adams's "The Wound Dresser" (with the baritone Thomas Hampson), which sets one of Whitman's Civil War hospital texts. After intermission, the resigned gloom of Schubert's Eighth Symphony gives way to the expressionist intensity of Berg's Three Orchestral Pieces—a deliberate attempt by Gilbert to finish the "Unfinished," as it were. (212-875-5656. Jan. 14 at 7:30, Jan. 15 at 2, and Jan. 16 at 8.)

TABLES FOR TWO
TIPSY PARSON

Tipsy PARSON

JESSIE WENDER

156 Ninth Ave., between 19th and 20th Sts. (212-620-4545)—There's something about Julie Taras Wallach and Tasha Garcia Gibson's restaurants. Their first, Little Giant, opened on the Lower East Side in 2004. It's a place go to again and again, even though the food ranges from alluring (it helped launch the devilled-egg renaissance) to inedible (the ramp orecchiette is one of the most stealthily awful dishes around). Tipsy Parson, named for a sherry-drenched sponge-cake trifle—"when saturated with the wine, pour over it a rich boiled custard flavored with what you like and stick blanched almonds thick all over the top," Mrs. Clement Carrington McPhail, of Richmond, wrote in the "F.F.V. Receipt Book," in 1894—is blessed with the same appeal. The frozen Concord-grape julep was tongue-paralyzingly sweet, but, hey, it's a julep. The silverware is vintage. The magnolia wallpaper in the bathroom, set against black lacquer fixtures, is a thing of beauty. Tipsy Parson is the Lady Bird Johnson of restaurants—so superficially charming that it's genuinely likable.

Wallach and Gibson really know how to put together a menu: pickled shrimp, pimento cheese, spiced nuts, turkey tails with hot-pepper jelly (more fun to read about than to eat). It is so nice to encounter cheese straws without having to attend a Junior League meeting. Tipsy Parson's version had a proper kick, as do the hush puppies—another great curatorial call—which were generously, nubbily battered without being too heavy. The ambrosia salad, replete with marshmallows and mandarin oranges, was surprisingly delicate. This is débutante food, though, and some of it is saccharine and fakey. The pork shank, served over a mush of stewed fruit, tasted like it had been sitting in Coca-Cola for days. The Brussels sprouts, with candied pecans and sorghum, were dull and watery. Broiled Rappahannock River oysters with pepper bacon, tarragon vinaigrette, and celery leaves sounded pretty delicious on paper, but were served at an alarming temperature. There is an amazing dessert at Tipsy Parson: the Grasshopper, which is a mint mousse the color of Aquafresh toothpaste, slopped into a Mason jar and buried in cookie crumbles, chocolate custard, and whipped cream. Eat it, and go directly to the dentist. On the way out, grab a business card, lettered in looping cursive on an old manila yard-sale tag. Just precious. (Open weekdays for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, weekends for brunch and dinner. Entrées $22-$26.)

—*Lauren Collins*

BRONX OPERA: "DIE DREI PINTOS"
The company presents what it calls the New York première of the comic opera by Carl Maria von Weber, which, in its completed version by Gustav Mahler, has lingered for a century at the edge of the repertory. (The three Pintos in question are Spanish gentlemen, not horses.) Benjamin Spierman's production is sung in English. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 212-772-4448. Jan. 16 at 8 and Jan. 17 at 2.)

VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
The last time the conductors Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez teamed up at Carnegie Hall, leading alternating concerts of the Mahler symphonies with the Staatskapelle Berlin, the results were decidedly mixed. (The great standout was Boulez's account of the Sixth.) Now, with the matchless Viennese ensemble, they go head to head in concerts grounded in the music of Beethoven and Schoenberg. Jan. 15 at 8: Barenboim leads the group in Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra, and the "Pre-

lude and Liebestod," from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde." ♦ Jan. 16 at 8: Boulez takes the podium to conduct a concert featuring works by Webern and Mahler (the Adagio from the Tenth Symphony) and two by Schoenberg—the Chamber Symphony No. 2 and the Piano Concerto (with Barenboim, who can be a formidable pianist, at the keyboard). ♦ Jan. 17 at 2: Barenboim returns to conduct Schoenberg's phantasmagorical Five Pieces for Orchestra, several of Boulez's trenchant "Notations," and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

RECITALS

NEW YORK FESTIVAL OF SONG: "KILLER B'S"

Since its inception, this vital series has been devoted to performing a broad selection of American song. Its next concert—offered in collaboration with the Juilliard's Department of Vocal Arts—ranges across a century of music, presenting songs by such composers as Samuel Barber, Irving Berlin, Amy Beach, William Bolcom, Leonard Bernstein, and the Beach Boys. (Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, Juilliard School. Jan. 13 at 8. For information about free tickets, which are required, call 212-769-7406.)

"CELEBRATING GEORGE CRUMB"

The Philadelphia master's eightieth birthday is the main occasion for this concert at (Le) Poisson Rouge by such musicians as the pianist Jenny Lin, the piano duo Stephanie & Saar, and members of the Sirius String Quartet. Performances of "Celestial Mechanics" and "Black Angels" anchor a program that also includes works by John King, Luigi Nono, and Randy Hostetler. (158 Bleecker St. www.lprnyc.com. Jan. 13 at 10.)

PHILIPPE JAROUSSKY

This young countertenor, whose exceptionally sweet voice can dispatch bel-canto coloratura as well as any mezzo-soprano, is the latest singing sensation out of France. He makes his New York recital début at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall, performing songs from the golden age of *mélodie* by Chausson (including "Le Colibri"), Chaminade, Fauré (featuring "Nell" and "En Sourdine"), Lekeu, and Reynaldo Hahn; Jérôme Ducros accompanies him. (212-247-7800. Jan. 14 at 7:30.)

YEFIM BRONFMAN AND NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC ENSEMBLES

The extraordinary Israeli-American pianist joins several of the orchestra's principal strings (including the violinist Sheryl Staples and the cellist Carter Brey) in Brahms's Piano Quintet, the finale of a concert that begins with music by Mozart and Ravel (the String Quartet). (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Jan. 17 at 2:30.)

AARON JAY KERNIS FIFTIETH-BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

Kernis made his first big splash as a composer with a performance by the New York Philharmonic in 1983, but cemented his reputation in the nineteen-nineties with a series of enormously appealing works that deftly blended minimalist and neo-Romantic influences. His exuberant and eclectically influenced style will be on full display in a tribute concert at (Le) Poisson Rouge—performed by such musicians as the violinists James Ehnes and Tim Fain, the singers Sadie Rosales and Robert Osborne, the guitarist David Tanenbaum, and the pianist Evelyne Luest—which will include a selection of chamber works from across three decades (including "Air," "The Blue Animals," and the New York première of "Two Awakenings and a Double Lullaby"). (158 Bleecker St. www.lprnyc.com. Jan. 18 at 7:30.)

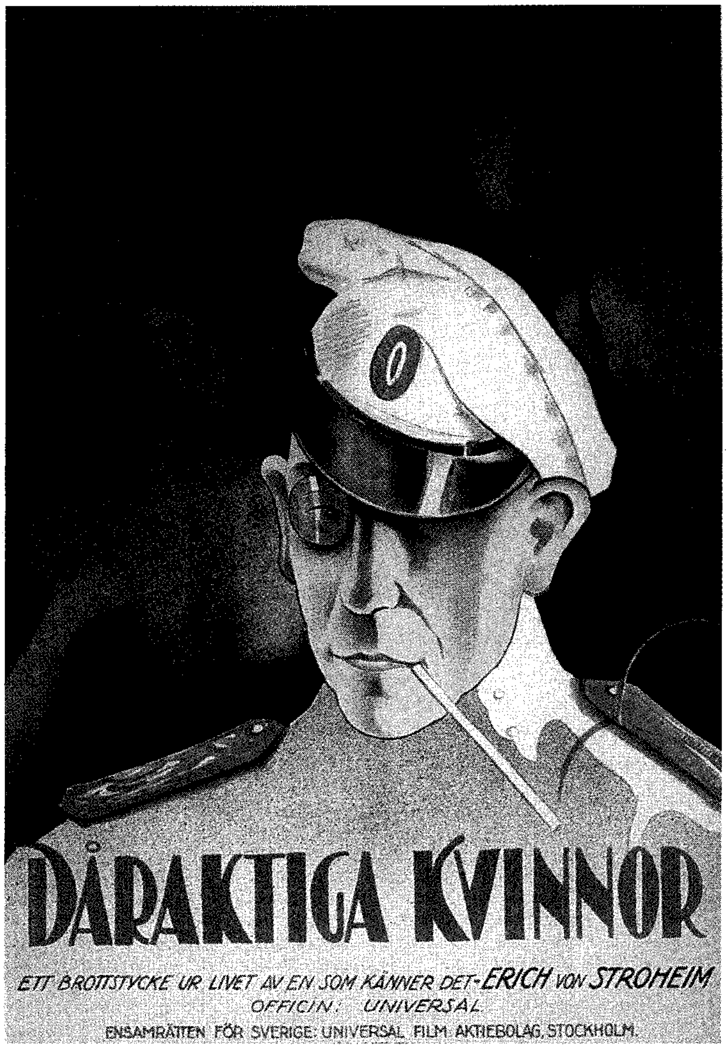
MOVIES OPENING

THE BOOK OF ELI

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Jan. 15. (In wide release.)

FISH TANK

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Jan. 15. (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)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DÅRAKTIGA KVINNOR
ETT BROTTSTYCKE UR LIVET AV EN SOM KÄNNER DET - ERICH VON STROHEIM
OFFICIN: UNIVERSAL
ENSAMRÄTTEN FÖR SVERIGE: UNIVERSAL FILM AKTIEBOLAG, STOCKHOLM.

Erich von Stroheim's "Foolish Wives" screens at MOMA Jan. 13-15.

UNIVERSAL FILM MANUFACTURING COMPANY/PHOTOFEST

HOUSE

The American theatrical première of this 1977 horror film, directed by Nobuhiko Obayashi, about a schoolgirl who brings her friends to her aunt's mysterious house. In Japanese. Opening Jan. 15. (IFC Center.)

MINE

Geralyn Pezanoski directed this documentary, about efforts to reunite survivors of Hurricane Katrina with their pets. Opening Jan. 15. (Cinema Village.)

THE SPY NEXT DOOR

Jackie Chan stars in this comedy as a retired C.I.A. operative who is drawn into trouble when his stepchildren inadvertently download secrets from his computer. Directed by Brian Levant; co-starring Amber Valletta and Billy Ray Cyrus. Opening Jan. 15. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS: THE SQUEAKQUEL

At the beginning of this children's comedy, the Chipmunks are at their rock-star peak, performing a version of "You Really Got Me" that, if it doesn't quite match the Kinks' original, certainly rips Van Halen's effort to shreds. Following an in-concert accident that lands their guardian and manager, Dave (Jason Lee), in the hospital, the boys are put in the care of Dave's slacker nephew Toby (Zachary Levi) and sent to school. Betty Thomas directs again, and the live-action/animation matrix is skillful, seamless, and gleefully ridiculous. The visages of the rockin' rodents are, in fact, remarkably expressive, the jokes are reasonably funny, the lesson of sticking by your pals is not too corny, and the battle-of-the-bands finale, in which Toby accepts some grownup responsibility and finds love in the process, is surprisingly moving.—*Ken Marks* (In wide release.)

AVATAR

As James Cameron, working in 3-D, thrusts us into the picture frame, brushing past tree branches, coursing alongside foaming-jawed creatures, we may be overcome by an uncanny sense of emerging, becoming, transcending—a sustained mood of elation produced by vaulting into space. This is the most physically beautiful American film in years. It's set on Pandora, a verdant moon, a hundred and fifty years from now, where the long-waisted, translucent-blue Na'vi live on turf that contains an energy-rich mineral that an American corporation, armed to the teeth with military contractors, wants to harvest. An ex-Marine (Sam Worthington) in the shape of a Na'vi—an avatar—is sent to spy, but he falls in love with a warrior princess (Zoë Saldana), and he winds up leading a defense of the Na'vi against the armed might of the military. It's the old story of Pocahontas and John Smith, mixed, perhaps, with "Dances with Wolves." The Na'vi, who are connected by neural networks to all living things, are meant to remind us of Native Americans; the military is meant to remind us of the shock-and-awe Bush Administration militarists. The story may be trite, but Cameron creates an entire world, including magnificent flying pterodactyls and a bright-red flying monster with jaws that could snap an oak. The movie is as much a vertical as a horizontal experience; its many parts cohere and flow together. With Sigourney Weaver as a high-minded biologist, Stephen Lang as a testosterone-pumped military leader, and Giovanni Ribisi as the cynical head of the corporate expedition.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 1/4/10.) (In wide release.)

BAR MITZVAH

This schmaltzy, stage-bound, and threadbare Yiddish melodrama, made in New York in 1935 but set in Poland, pays tribute to religious and theatrical traditions while surprisingly bursting their bonds in moments of modernist cinematic inspiration. It's centered on Yudele (Benjamin Schachtman), a boy from a pious and wealthy family who is about to make the Jewish rite of passage, when his long-widowed father, Israel (Boris Thomashevsky), brings home his young new wife (Anita Chayes), a shameless gold-digger. As the plot lurches and twists through a maze of dramatic clichés, it incites vehemently histrionic performances which sometimes creak and sometimes dazzle. An extraordinary dance number by Sam Colton, as an American suitor looking to wow Yudele's nubile sister (Gertrude Bulman), offers Astaire-like flashes of joyful brilliance. And, though Henry Lynn's direction is, for the most part, merely (and barely) functional, it rises, on a few occasions, to astounding and, perhaps, unconscious invention—notably a song performed by Yudele's ghostly double, as well as a stunningly original shot that abandons a moment of high drama in favor of the reaction it arouses. These lightning bolts of cinematic revelation suggest the pliable, accessible modernism of the cinema in even the most constraining of circumstances.—*Richard Brody* (Film Society of Lincoln Center; Jan. 14.)

CRAZY HEART
Jeff Bridges is Bad Blake, a well-travelled country singer and a barely functioning mess with a ratty beard and ponytail, a large belly, and a constant cigarette and glass of bourbon. He drives alone through vast stretches of the Southwest, drifting from saloon to bowling alley, performing with ragged pickup bands. He can still sing and play, a little, though he may not make it through a set without heaving in an alley. The rest of the time he lies on his back in a squalid motel. Bridges luxuriates in indolence, though, unlike the sublime Dude in "The Big Lebowski," Bad is not pleased with himself; there's an irritable pride churning around inside the man. Maggie Gyllenhaal, ardent and looking great, turns up as Jean Craddock, an arts journalist and single mother who penetrates the gloom of Bad's motel room for an interview. Jean wakes up the decrepit singer, but this is not a movie about miracles (the general theme of Bad's songs is "Everything is screwed up, but nothing can be done about it"). Nor is the movie quite a miracle itself. It has an easy, unforced rhythm, yet it needs more plot, more complication, more conflict. Written and directed by Scott Cooper, from Thomas Cobb's novel.—*D.D.* (12/14/09) (In limited release.)

DAYBREAKERS
The plot of the Australian brothers Peter and Michael Spierig's second feature, a sci-fi thriller set in 2019, is B-movie gold. A decade after "the Outbreak," caused by a lone bat, most of the human race has turned into vampires—causing a catastrophic worldwide shortage of human blood, for which the few remaining humans are being hunted as well as "farmed" by industrial conglomerates, including one headed by Charles Bromley (Sam Neill). Dr. Edward Dalton (Ethan Hawke), a hematologist employed by Bromley, is working on a synthetic blood substitute, but his real quest (which conflicts with the company's interests) is to find a cure for vampirism, a vision intensified by his encounter with a clandestine band of humans headed by Audrey (Claudia Karvan), with whom he falls in love, and a survivalist (Willem Dafoe) who calls himself Elvis and seems to have come back from the other side. The conceit is worked out in whiz-bang diabolical detail—because vampires can't survive sunlight (it makes them burst into flames), cars feature a blacked-out "daylight driving mode" and cities have "subwalks"—and brought to life with apt prosthetic, digital, and scenographic effects. The cleverness is somewhat vitiated by ponderous direction and a bit too much fine acting, but the Spierigs deliver the conceptual delight of a retro fifties-style classic.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

FOOLISH WIVES
In his third film, from 1922, the director Erich von Stroheim caustically applies his camera to the casinos of Monte Carlo and the luxury hotels and squalid back streets of Monaco to burn away illusions of civilized behavior and reveal the full force of their high-toned denizens' greed, cravenness, violence, lust, and downright villainy. Stroheim stars as Count Wladislaw Sergius Karamzin, a dubious Russian aristocrat in exile and a suave but penniless seducer who, during the high season, rents a palatial home with two ostensible *cousines* and plans to pay for it with his conquests' hush money. His chosen prey is the wife of the newly arrived American Ambassador. Stroheim marshalls colossal (and colossally expensive) sets, an army of extras, and a cast of disturbingly plausible grotesques who display a wide spectrum of human failings, but the prime source of his teeming realism is visual: he bangs out angles that slice up the action, like a Cubist knife-thrower, and puts them together with a pre-Eisensteinian cunning. With its mad grandeur, seething bitterness, and vengeful unmasking, Stroheim's enterprise reflects his own vertiginous arc of experience, from fin-de-siècle Vienna and Ellis Island to the fleshpots of boomtown Hollywood. Silent.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Jan. 13-15.)

THE HIDDEN FORTRESS
This sublime Japanese medieval entertainment, released in 1958, renders a comedy of ethical equilibrium as a giant sixteenth-century civil-war epic. At the center is a righteous, ornery princess in disguise, piercing enemy lines to seek sanctuary in a friendly province, and a valiant, no-nonsense general (Toshiro Mifune), who sacrifices his own sister to protect her. But Akira Kurosawa tells the story from the perspective of two peasant helpers who hope only for a piece of her dynastic treasure and can't even be trusted with her real identity. (George Lucas has acknowledged these antiheroes as the inspiration for R2-D2 and C-3PO, in "Star Wars.") Using wide-screen for the first time, Kurosawa turns his sprawling frames into kinetic tapestries of anarchy. His chases and duels boast the oversized choreography and ruthless movements that would influence Leone and Peckinpah. It's Mifune's most gloriously uncomplicated performance—in repose his conscience may haunt him, but in battle he rouses the innocent fervor of Fairbanks or Flynn at their best. In Japanese.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; Jan. 16.)

THE IMAGINARIUM OF DR. PARNASSUS
A travelling theatre rolls through modern London, inviting citizens to step up and share in its wonders; nobody orchestrates a blast from the past quite like Terry Gilliam. His new film stars Christopher Plummer as the eponymous doctor, who claims immortality and has entered into a pact with the Devil (Tom Waits), although, as often with Gilliam, the fine print of the story feels elusive. Parnassus is both Faust and Prospero—he even has a half-obedient, adoring daughter (Lily Cole), plus a diminutive sprite (Verne Troyer), to complete the picture. The film makes the least impact when it aims for maximum strangeness (the dreamworlds into which the theatre's customers are plunged are no more than the fruits of a wandering fancy), whereas its everyday setting, beside the Thames, has a sad, valedictory grit that is hard to shake off. With Johnny Depp, Colin Farrell, Jude Law, and the late Heath Ledger, all in the same role, as a ponytailed charmer in a white suit.—*Anthony Lane* (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

IT'S COMPLICATED
Is Nancy Meyers ("Something's Gotta Give") the squarest person ever to make a movie? This new embarrassment helps make the case. Meryl Streep, reduced to giggling, fumbling, gossipy ordinariness for the first time in her career, is a wealthy divorcée with a bakery and a big house in Santa Barbara that, for some reason, isn't big enough. She wants to build an addition with a huge kitchen (even though half the movie takes place in her existing kitchen, which is large enough to yield endless meals and seat eight). She has an affair with her ex-husband, who left her ten years earlier, played by Alec Baldwin, who comes off as hyper-aggressive, dull, wet, and fat. At the same time, Streep flirts with her architect, played all milquetoasty by Steve Martin. The characters are upper-middle-class people who act like TV's lower-middle-class people. There are many scenes devoted to the extraordinary news that sixty-year-olds actually do it. The dialogue is redundant, the direction coarse and obvious. John Krasinski, mugging creatively as Streep's prospective son-in-law, is the only one in the movie operating with professional skill.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

THE LOVELY BONES
In the movie, as in Alice Sebold's 2002 best-seller, Susie (Saoirse Ronan), a fourteen-year-old girl, nar-

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
VOCAL HERO

There's no politic way to put it—Marianne Faithfull's voice is not what it once was. It may have been the hard living (not everyone who hangs with the Stones has their vampire blood) or the illnesses she's stared down in the last fifteen

years, but the voice that seemed to be singing about itself on 1979's "Broken English" is now entirely busted. That's not a drawback. Like Leonard Cohen, Faithfull is making the most of her older instrument. On "Easy Come Easy Go," from last year, Faithfull tackles an eclectic set of covers, moving from Dolly Parton to the Decemberists and back through Randy Newman and Duke Ellington. The song of a new traditionalist like Neko Case becomes stranded in time as Faithfull leaches out all marks of the present. When the producer Hal Willner wants to go straight cabaret for the title number (originally recorded by Bessie Smith in 1924), Faithfull makes everyone else sound like a straight-A student. Her voice is the sound of sin, finally collecting its wages. Faithfull appears at the Allen Room on Jan. 13.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

CARMEN SEGOVIA

rates, from Heaven or wherever it is, her own murder in 1973 at the hands of a neighborhood creep (Stanley Tucci); then she observes her father (Mark Wahlberg), mother (Rachel Weisz), and sister (Rose McIver) as they miserably cope with her death. But, in Peter Jackson's adaptation, she is not merely present in their minds; she is there, prompting, warning, claiming a kiss from her handsome teen boyfriend. The book was brought off with considerable delicacy—it's really a detailed portrait of a suburban girl's life in the seventies. Literalized in the movie, the material is closer to a high-toned ghost story. Jackson intermingles family goings on with Susie's gossamer interventions, and some of the brushed-with-ether imagery comes close to the uncanny, but a lot of it is fussy-baroque, redundant, and undramatic. Jackson's Heaven has luscious hills and dales, gleaming lakes, and fields of waving grain. The picture has been fashioned as a family entertainment about a grisly murder and grief, and it's more than a little sickening. Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens worked with Jackson on the screenplay. With Michael Imperioli.—*D.D.* (12/14/09) (In wide release.)

NINE

Given how hard it is to get movies off the ground, why are so many adapted from works that cry out *not* to be made into movies in the first place? Just as it was easy to see that a film of "The Road," shorn of Cormac McCarthy's prose, would—and could only—slow to a miserable plod, so Rob Marshall's new work was, from the start, bowed by the burden of its origins. It is adapted from a stage musical, which was in turn adapted from Fellini's "8½," which is all about a man who is unable to make a movie. For all the high-kicking oomph to which Marshall's film aspires, that sense of inertia lingers; we see it in Guido Contini (Daniel Day-Lewis), who doesn't even have a script on the eve of production. What he does have is the memory of women crowding in upon him, and each of them gets to say, or sing, her piece; the musical numbers are not embedded in the action but float alongside it as a form of fantastical commentary—again, hardly an incentive for dramatic pace. The singers are a distinguished company: Sophia Loren, Penélope Cruz, Nicole Kidman, Kate Hudson, Fergie, Judi Dench, and Marion Cotillard, with the laurels divided between the last two. But even Day-Lewis, for all his flair and cunning, cannot spice the proceedings with much joy, and we are left with a hymn to regret.—*A.L.* (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

POLICE, ADJECTIVE

Cristi (Dragos Bucur), a young plainclothes officer in the Romanian town of Vaslui, is assigned to follow a trio of teens, one of whom associates with a drug dealer. To Cristi's dismay, he is ordered to make a case against another kid in the group who is merely a user. The officer's struggle to resist his orders is the soul of this drama, directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, a quietly jolting dialectical and lexicographical masterwork. Porumboiu's images, all nouns and verbs, withhold inflection in order to highlight the moral weight of creating and interpreting information; his taut long takes maintain the tension of incisive scenes featuring debates about language. Cristi's wife, Anca (Irina Saulescu), is a literature teacher, and their dinnertime parsing of a pop song and of his grammar (with the dictates of the Romanian Academy cited as authority) sets the stage for the climactic showdown with his chief (Vlad Ivanov), which takes place over a dictionary. With a quietly scintillating depth, the movie ultimately reveals the odd title's chilling implications and casts over today's Romania dark shadows from its Soviet-dominated past. In Romanian.—*R.B.* (IFC Center.)

SHERLOCK HOLMES

Arthur Conan Doyle's material has been grabbed by its velvet collar and kicked into twenty-first-century media culture. Such a turn was inevitable. The subdued charm of Doyle's hansom cabs, enveloping fogs, and courteous manners—the façade of gentility broken up so delightfully by devilish conspiracies—is not of our age. In Guy Ritchie's version, London in the eighteen-nineties is rubbled and mucky, with beggars underfoot, a city fouled by half-finished industrial monstrosities. The director's visual style is graphic-novel Victoriana, with steampunk interiors—ironworks and infernal machines with a retro-future look—and also dim laboratories in which everything looks rank. The movie is grimly overproduced and exhausting, an irritating, preposterous, but fitfully enjoyable work, in which every element has been inflated. As Holmes, Robert Downey, Jr., engages, bare-chested, in Victorian extreme fighting before a howling arena of Englishmen with bad teeth. Dr. Watson (Jude Law) is a fighter, too, wielding cane and sabre, palm and foot. The two men flirt with each other outrageously but chastely—it's the most amusing thing in the movie. With Rachel McAdams as Holmes's long-lost inamorata, Irene Adler, who turns up as a criminal.—*D.D.* (1/4/10) (In wide release.)

A SINGLE MAN

Tom Ford's début feature is adapted from the novel of the same name by Christopher Isherwood. Colin Firth plays George, who teaches literature at a college in Los Angeles in 1962; we find him bereaved after the death of his lover, Jim (Matthew Goode), although the action skips back in time, to show us the languor of the life they shared. There is barely enough here to sustain a plot, and much of the movie passes in a gleaming, immaculate haze; in keeping with the director's other career, as a fashion designer, no chance is missed to deck the characters in the neat, crisp outfits of the period, or to bathe them in the flattering rose light of the city. (Does Jim make his first appearance in George's life wearing white naval ducks? Of course he does.) Yet the film is pulled from its dreaminess by two performances: first, that of Firth, who shows how a heart can be both tightened and undone by grief (especially a grief that needs to be kept secret), and, second, that of Julianne Moore, who plays his drunken friend. The long evening they spend together, dicing with love and the knowledge of wasted years, is a scene not to be forgotten, or denied. With Nicholas Hoult as a precocious flirt.—*A.L.* (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

SWEETGRASS

A calm and composed documentary, by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, about the last herd of sheep to be driven over the high pastures of the Beartooth Mountains, in Montana. The result is not, however, an exercise in nostalgic regret, let alone in the lyrical ease that is promised by the title; just listen to one of the herders ranting, in a string of unsweet oaths, about the physical strains of the job and the ornery behavior of his flock. Yet there is no denying the sweep and grandeur of the landscapes that he and his fellows traverse, and the camera often pauses patiently to absorb them; indeed, the whole movie is in no hurry, lingering over the rhythm of the shearing or waiting for the sheep to swarm endlessly down the main street of a local town. Though the tale of these wry, hard-bitten lives is told without either music or a narrating voice, the final effect is not to numb or confound the viewer, but rather to cast a spell.—*A.L.* (1/11/10) (Film Forum.)

THE WHITE RIBBON

Even those who have resisted—or, indeed, recoiled from—the work of Michael Haneke may find themselves drawn into the calm and complicated tale that he tells in his latest film. We find ourselves in a village in northern, Protestant Germany, a year before the outbreak of the First World War, and there, with only the briefest of excursions to the world beyond, we stay. We also come to know, or think we know, the home lives of its leading citizens, including the local baron (Ulrich Tukur), the pastor (Burghart Klaussner), the doctor (Rainer Bock), and the doctor's frightened housekeeper (Susanne Lothar). More baffling are the lives of their various children, who are the victims of—and, we increasingly suspect, possible culprits in—a series of mysterious crimes. This being a Haneke project, no case is thoroughly solved, and the air of threat that looms over the population is never dispelled; we can readily imagine, in fact, that its malignity might endure for years to come—perhaps to the verge of another war. The film, however, should not be read as a plain parable of incipient Nazism; the warning that it issues, about the fallout of social repression, is a universal one, and the manner of its delivery is disarmingly graceful. The monochrome imagery is not just jewel-sharp but, unusually for Haneke, touched with moments of loveliness and hints of peace, as in the subplot of a schoolteacher (Christian Friedel) and his beloved (Leonie Benesch). You expect harm to befall them, like a plague, but, for once, it stays its hand. In German.—*A.L.* (In limited release.)

YOUTH IN REVOLT

C. D. Payne's tale of a precocious teen-ager, which has enjoyed a modish success among readers of the same vintage, is brought to the screen. The hero, Nick Twisp, is played by Michael Cera, as is François Dillinger, the louche, faux-French alter ego whom Nick devises as both goad and helpmeet. The film is lively, light, and frantic, yet not much of note actually happens; on vacation, Nick falls for a proud, cool-tempered soul named Sheeni (Portia Doubleday), who gradually, and half-grudgingly, returns his love. There are plenty of escapades—a nocturnal raid on a girls' dormitory, a cunning deployment of magic mushrooms, and so forth—but they seem to unfurl in the margins of the plot; likewise, few members of the impressive adult cast (which includes Ray Liotta, Fred Willard, Zach Galifianakis, Steve Buscemi, and M. Emmet Walsh) are allowed to take center stage for long. Maybe that is an accurate reflection of the adolescent mind, in its need to scorn or elide more senior lives, but dramatically it still feels like a waste. Even Adhir Kalyan, who plays Nick's friend Vijay, and thereby introduces us to the unfamiliar concept of the suave dork, drops out of sight with unseemly speed. The animated sequences that top, tail, and occasionally spice the action are a foolish joy. Directed by Miguel Arteta.—*A.L.* (1/11/10) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

THE BLIND SIDE: In wide release. **FANTASTIC MR. FOX:** In wide release. **THE YOUNG VICTORIA:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—The films of Nikolaus Geyrhalter. All films are in German. Jan. 15 at 7 and Jan. 18 at 9: "Pripyat" (1999). ♦ Jan. 15 at 9:15 and Jan. 17 at 3:45: "7915 KM" (2008). ♦ Jan. 16 at 3: "Washed Ashore" (1994). ♦ Jan. 16 at 5: "The Year After Dayton" (1997). ♦ Jan. 16 at 9 and Jan. 18 at 7: "Our Daily Bread" (2005). ♦ Jan. 17 at 6 and Jan. 19 at 7: "Elsewhere" (2001). ♦ "Essential Cinema: Carl Theodore Dreyer." Jan. 16 at 6: "The Passion of Joan of Arc" (1928; silent). ♦ Jan. 16 at 8: "Vampyr" (1932; in German). ♦ Jan. 17 at 4:45: "Day of Wrath" (1943; in Danish). ♦ Jan. 17 at 7: "Ordet" (1955; in Danish).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." Jan. 18 at 1: "Soundtrack for a Revolution" (2009, Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through Feb. 4: "Akira Kurosawa Centennial." All films are in Japanese. Jan. 13-14 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Stray Dog" (1949). ♦ Jan. 15 at 1:10, 3:20, 5:30, 7:40, and 9:50: "Throne of Blood" (1957). ♦ Jan. 16 at 1, 3:40, 6:20, and 9: "The Hidden Fortress" (†). ♦ Jan. 17 at 1:30, 4:30, and 7:30: "The Idiot" (1951). ♦ Jan. 18 at 1, 4:15, and 7:30: "Sanshiro Sugata I" (1943). ♦ Jan. 18 at 2:35, 5:50, and 9:10: "Sanshiro Sugata II" (1945). ♦ Jan. 19 at 1, 4:25, and 7:50: "One Wonderful Sunday" (1947). ♦ Jan. 19 at 3:05, 6:30, and 10: "They Who Tread on Tiger's Tail" (1945).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—New York Jewish Film Festival. Jan. 13 at 1 and 6:15: "Saviors in the Night" (2009, Ludi

Boeken; in German). ♦ Jan. 13 at 3:45 and 9 and Jan. 14 at 3:30: “Gruber’s Journey” (2008, Radu Gabrea; in Romanian). ♦ Jan. 14 at 1:15: “Bar Mitzvah” (†). ♦ Jan. 14 at 6:15: “Ahead of Time” (2009, Bob Richman) and “Making the Crooked Straight” (2008, Susan Cohn Rockefeller). ♦ Jan. 14 at 9 and Jan. 16 at 6:30: “Ajami” (2008, Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani; in Arabic and Hebrew). ♦ Jan. 16 at 9:15, Jan. 17 at 4:15, and Jan. 18 at 8:30: “The Jazz Baroness” (2009, Hannah Rothschild). ♦ Jan. 17 at 1:30: “The Axe of Wandsbek” (1951, Falk Harnack; in German). ♦ Jan. 17 at 6:30 and Jan. 19 at 1 and 6:15: “Happy End” (2009, Frans Weisz; in Dutch) and “Point of View” (2008, Avishag Leibovich; in Hebrew). ♦ Jan. 17 at 9 and Jan. 18-19 at 3:30: “Protector” (2009, Marek Najbrt; in Czech) and “With a Little Patience” (2008, Laszlo Nemes). ♦ Jan. 18 at 12:30 and Jan. 19 at 8:45: “Leon Blum: For All Mankind” (2009, Jean Bodon; in French) and “Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness” (2009, Llewellyn Smith). ♦ Jan. 18 at 6:15: “Forgotten Transports: To Poland” (2009, Lukás Pribyl; in Czech). ♦ “*Film Comment* Selects.” Jan. 15 at 7:30: “Neil Young Trunk Show” (2009, Jonathan Demme). The screening will be followed by a Q. & A. with the director and an open-bar after-party.

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through Feb. 23: The films of Charlotte Gainsbourg. Jan. 19 at 12:30, 4, and 7:30: “My Wife Is an Actress” (2001, Yvan Attal; in French).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—Through April 4: “La Crème du Crime.” Jan. 15-18 at 11 A.M.: “Pierrot le Fou” (1965, Jean-Luc Godard; in French). ♦ “Waverly Midnights,” the films of Paul Verhoeven. Jan. 15-17: “Showgirls” (1995). ♦ “Stranger Than Fiction,” a documentary series. Jan. 19 at 8: “Running Fence” (1978, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—“An Auteurist History of Film.” Jan. 13-15 at 1:30: “ Foolish Wives” (†). ♦ “MOMA Presents.” Jan. 13-14 at 7, Jan. 15 at 4:30, Jan. 16 at 4, Jan. 17 at 2:30, and Jan. 18 at 8: “Carmel“ (2009, Amos Gitai). ♦ “Global Lens.” Jan. 14 at 4: “Gods” (2008, Josué Méndez; in Spanish). ♦ Jan. 14 at 8, Jan. 15 and 18 at 4, Jan. 16 at 1:30, and Jan. 17 at 5: “Adrift” (2009, Bui Thac Chuyen; in Vietnamese). ♦ Jan. 15 at 7: “Masquerades” (2008, Lyes Salem; in Arabic). ♦ Jan. 16 at 7:30: “Becloud” (2009, Alejandro Gerber Bicecci; in Spanish). ♦ Jan. 17 at 2: “My Tehran for Sale” (2009, Granaz Moussavi; in Farsi).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000, ext. 344)—“Cabaret Cinema.” Jan. 15 at 9:30: “Blue Velvet” (1986, David Lynch), introduced by Nick Antosca.

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—“Sunshine@ Midnight.” Jan. 15-17: “Labyrinth” (1986, Jim Henson).

READINGS AND TALKS

THE POWERHOUSE ARENA
Jan. 14 at 7: The writer, editor, and publishing-industry veteran Daniel Menaker discusses his new book, “A Good Talk,” a guide to conversation. Lorin Stein, an editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, will be the host. Jan. 19 at 7: Zoë Heller reads from her novel “The Believers.” (37 Main St., at Water St., Brooklyn. 718-666-3049.)

BARNES & NOBLE
The writer Colin Broderick reads from his memoir about the drinking life, “Orangutan.” (97 Warren St. No tickets necessary. Jan. 14 at 7.)

SUNNY'S BAR
The illustrator Jill DeGroff, the wife of the noted mixologist Dale DeGroff, celebrates the opening of an exhibition of her caricatures of the people who keep cocktails flowing. She’ll draw a few portraits, and special drinks will be served. (253 Conover St., Red Hook, Brooklyn. No tickets necessary. Jan. 15 at 8. The exhibition is up through Feb. 28.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

"THREE"
Central Park’s Swedish Cottage Marionette Theatre dates back to 1876. The quaint, two-story wood-beam structure was Sweden’s entry in Philadelphia’s Centennial Exposition that year. Frederick Law Olmsted had it brought to Central Park after that. Since 1947, the building has housed a marionette-theatre troupe. The Cottage’s new show, “Three,” which opens Jan. 12, mashes up the fairy tales “The Three Little Pigs,” “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” and “The Three Bears.” (79th St. at the West Drive, just south of the Delacorte Theatre. For more information, visit www.cityparksfoundation.org. The show runs through June 25.)

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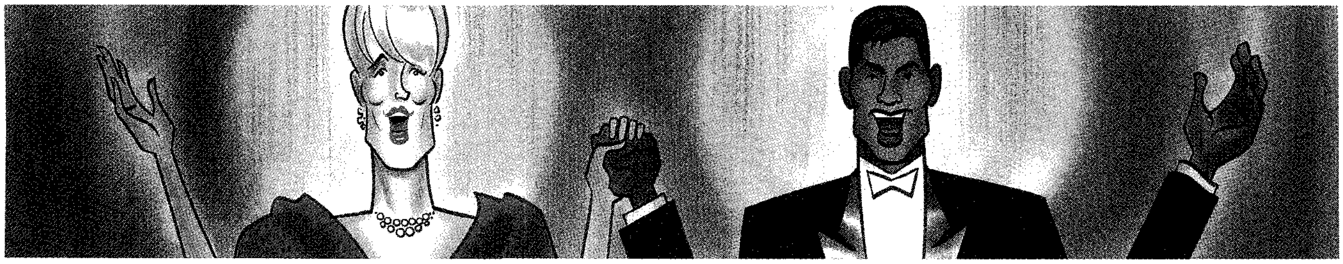


MAURICE VELLEKOOP

ON THE HORIZON

THE THEATRE
HE SAID, SHE SAID
Jan. 26

John Lithgow and Jennifer Ehle star in the Second Stage première of “Mr. & Mrs. Fitch,” a new comedy by Douglas Carter Beane. Scott Ellis directs the play, about two scheming gossip columnists who happen to be married. (212-246-4422.)

ART
RIGHT OF CLAY
Jan. 26–May 2

“Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey,” at the Museum of Arts and Design, celebrates the career of an American sculptor whose colorful glazed ceramic sculptures of men and women pushed the boundaries of the medium. (212-299-7777.)

MOVIES
WAY TO THE FORUM
Feb. 3–20

Film Forum’s fortieth anniversary is also Karen Cooper’s thirty-eighth at its helm. To commemorate the occasions, MOMA will present her selection of documentaries from among the many that have premièred at Film Forum under her aegis, including “Let’s Get Lost,” Bruce Weber’s film about Chet Baker; Agnès Varda’s personal essay “The Gleaners and I”; and Terry Zwigoff’s “Crumb.” (212-708-9480.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
JUNE IN FEBRUARY
Feb. 7

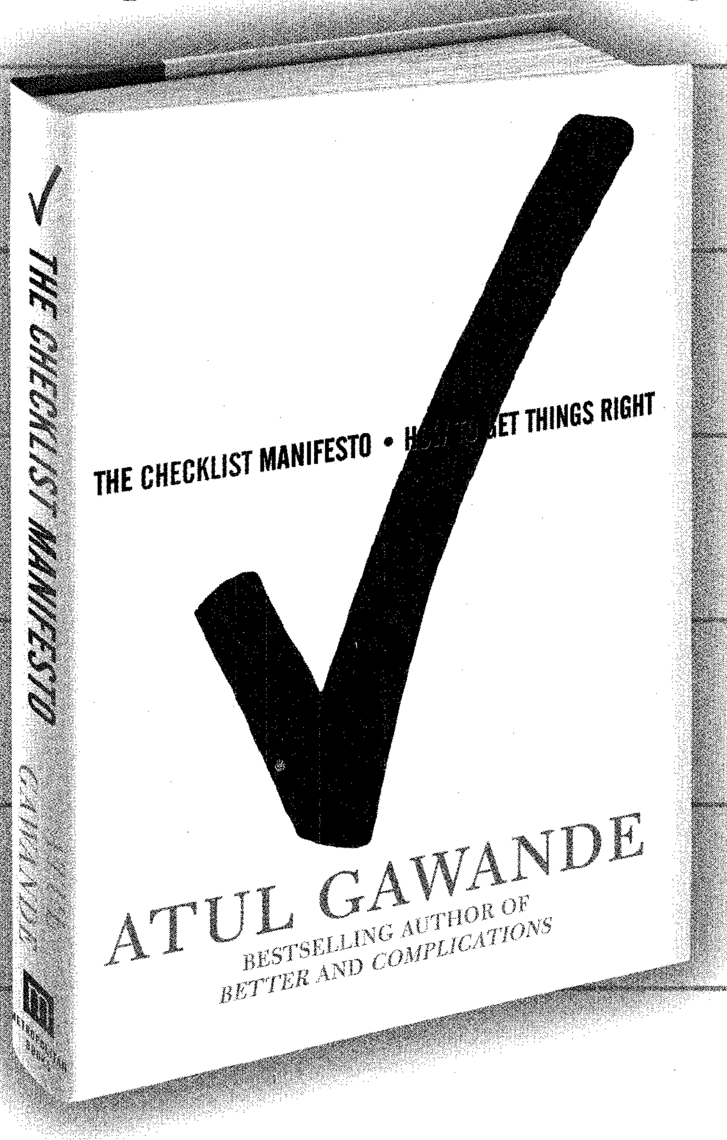
The George London Foundation Series at the Morgan Library & Museum offers a chance to hear world-class veteran singers together with up-and-coming artists. The next one features a very rare performance by the soprano June Anderson, who will appear along with the tenor Sean Panikkar. (212-685-0008.)

NIGHT LIFE
MOVIN’ ON UP
Feb. 17–21

Heidi Rodewald and Stew, who anchor the band the Negro Problem and recently developed the Broadway show “Passing Strange,” return with a new project, “Making It.” The multimedia concert at St. Ann’s Warehouse details their journey from small stages to the Great White Way. (718-254-8779.)

June Anderson and Sean Panikkar, at the Morgan Library & Museum.

When lives are on the line, the best response is surprisingly simple.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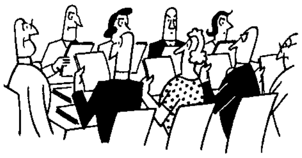
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THREATS



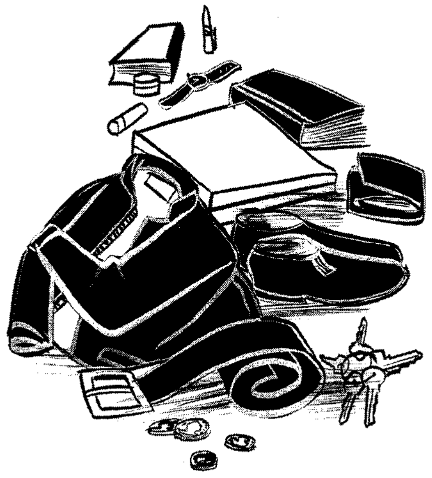
An underwear bomber who attempts mass murder on Christmas Day is bound to leave many people upset and a few unhinged. The days since the events aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 have felt like an induced flashback to that dislocating season when the country lost its innocence about the dot-connecting skills of its government. In particular, the tragicomic announcements and rescinding of announcements by the Transportation Security Administration—concerning, for example, when airline passengers might be permitted to read books while in flight—raised the possibility that, more than eight years after September 11th, the United States, like some synthetic organism immune to the laws of evolution, had failed to adapt to the challenges of Al Qaeda.

Compounding this impression, at least on the cable news channels, has been the resurrection—as predictable as the penultimate scene in a slasher movie—of the Cheney World View. Its principal proponent took time off from composing his memoir to issue a statement to Politico that was so lacking in dignity and restraint that it hinted at the presence of a sinister franking machine. On President Obama:

> He seems to think if he has a low-key response to an attempt to blow up an airliner and kill hundreds of people, we won't be at war. He seems to think if he gives terrorists the rights of Americans, lets them lawyer up and reads them their Miranda rights, we won't be at war. . . . But we are at war.

Apart from its construction on a false premise ("Now let me be clear: we are indeed at war with Al Qaeda and its affiliates," Obama declared last May; "We are at war," he said again last week), the statement, and the attention it received, suggested that American discourse on counterterrorism policy remains frozen in 2002. Fortunately, there is abundant evidence that the United States is entering a new era in its struggle against terrorists, one in which government and society are proving to be self-correcting, while Al Qaeda, like Dick Cheney, is proving to be self-isolating.

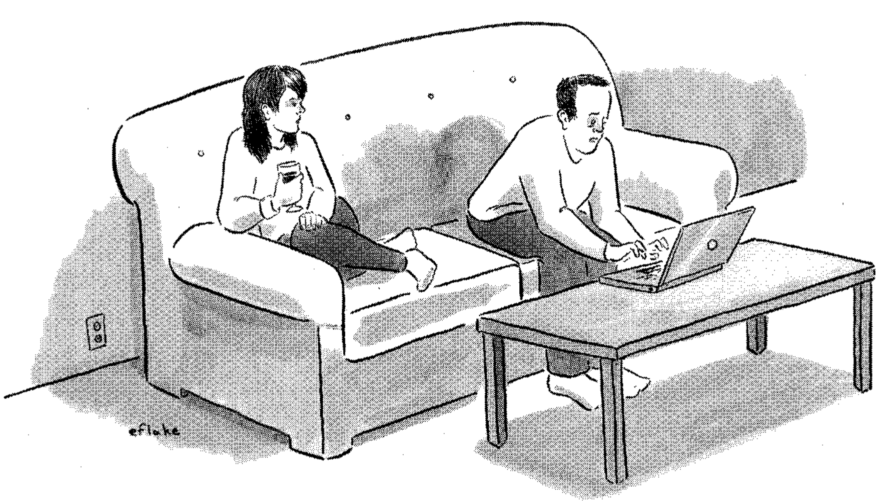
Flight 253 did expose appalling gaps in America's terrorism defenses. Some of the "systemic" failures described in documents and statements released last week by the White House, such as the intelligence bureaucracy's recurrent dot dyslexia, were difficult to evaluate, given the scant detail; they may have been as inevitable as human imperfection. But other breakdowns inventoried defy understanding after so many years and so many dollars: inadequate watch-listing procedures; too few air marshals; and the failure by analysts to properly search databases for biographical insight into Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the suspected bomber, after he had been reported by his father.



The attempted Christmas attack also put Al Qaeda's resourcefulness on full display. In its third decade, under severe pressure, it has evolved into a jihadi version of an Internet-enabled direct-marketing corporation structured like Mary Kay, but with martyrdom in place of pink Cadillacs. Al Qaeda shifts shapes and seizes opportunities, characteristics that argue for its longevity. It will be able to wreak havoc periodically for as long as it can recruit suicide bombers and well-educated talent, as it has done consistently.

Yet Al Qaeda is also weakening. Osama bin Laden sought to lead the vanguard of a spreading revolution. Instead, he and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are hunkered down, presumably along the Afghan-Pakistani border, surrounded by only about two hundred hard-core followers. Their adherents in Yemen and Africa number no more than a few thousand. Al Qaeda in Iraq is a tiny fragment of its former self. Bin Laden's relations with the Taliban seem brittle. Unlike Hezbollah, Al Qaeda provides no social

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL



"You gotta help me stop looking up stuff I don't actually care about."

• •

services and thus has built no political movement. Unlike Hamas, its bloody nihilism has attracted no states that are willing to defend its legitimacy. In a world of at least one and a half billion Muslims, this does not a revolution, or even a vanguard, make.

Many of bin Laden's declared goals, such as the removal of American soldiers from Muslim lands, still resonate in Islamic societies. Yet, in polls conducted across the Muslim world, large majorities repudiate Al Qaeda, and particularly its tactic of murdering civilians. It is common to observe that bin Laden's poll ratings have collapsed in recent years because his violence has taken the lives of Muslims as well as infidels. Actually, polling shows that citizens of Islamic countries, as elsewhere, overwhelmingly disapprove of any indiscriminate killing, whatever the victims' religious beliefs, and no matter the cause.

Since September 11th, American public opinion about how to respond to bin Laden's threats has also evolved. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, the electorate chose nominees in both major parties who opposed torture. Exit polls indicated that one of the reasons voters elected Barack Obama was to improve America's image abroad.

In office, Obama has begun to reframe counterterrorism strategy. He has crafted a posture of strategic patience, premised upon a forward defense and the durability of American constitutional values. When the White House reorganized the staffs of the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council last year, it created a new "resilience policy" directorate. In May, in a speech on terrorism delivered at the National Archives, Obama remarked:

> From Europe to the Pacific, we've been the nation that has shut down torture chambers and replaced tyranny with the rule of law. That is who we are. And where terrorists offer only the injustice of disorder and destruction, America must demonstrate that our values and institutions are more resilient than a hateful ideology.

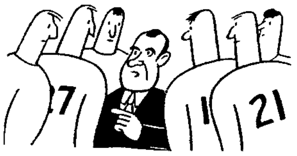
The United States is hardly the first democracy to have its nerves jangled and its values challenged by persistent terrorism. The lessons from Britain, India, Israel, Turkey, and elsewhere imply that democracies require time as well as trial and error to find a sustainable balance of politics and policy (as was true of the United States, with respect to Communism, during the Cold War). The examples from abroad suggest that, while the cost of learning about terrorism in a democracy can be very high, it leads in time to strategic postures, backed by public opinion, that are based on national principles similar to those which Obama outlined in May. After the devastating attacks in Mumbai just fourteen months ago, for example, the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, ignored jingoistic cries for military strikes against Pakistan. In response, Indian voters last spring returned him to office and gave his party its best showing in nearly two decades.

Wrestling over how to close Guantánamo and the use of full-body scanners, the American public will once again reconsider the balance of its own counterterrorism policies; so will Obama. Last week, he said that the breakdowns that almost claimed the lives of Flight 253's passengers were "my responsibility." He was right; such is his office. Yet the President has neither overestimated nor underestimated terrorism. His record shows that he studies and adapts. May his curriculum always consist of near-misses.

—*Steve Coll*

SMACKDOWN DEPT.

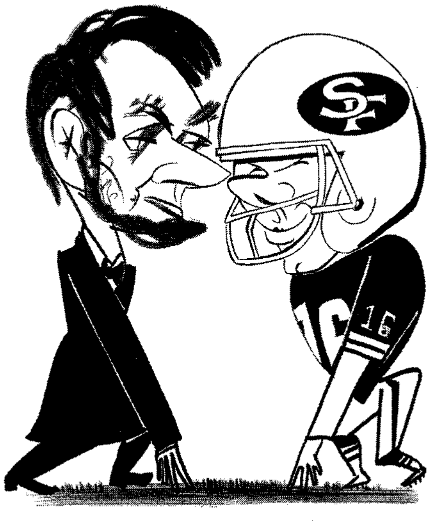
44 VS. XLIV



A year ago, during the Inauguration of Barack Obama, Don Steinberg, a forty-eight-year-old freelance sportswriter in Philadelphia, wondered why Obama, as the forty-fourth President, hadn't summoned up, as a guest or a symbol, the former home-run champion Hank Aaron, who during his playing days wore the number 44. Sports guys think like that: numbers, gestures, coincidences, comparisons. Steinberg soon realized that there was a football echo, too—that the 2010 Super Bowl, now less than a month away, would be the forty-fourth, or, rather, the XLIVth. This alignment, like the Rapture, will happen only once.

Over Thanksgiving, Steinberg decided to create a showdown in which each President goes up against his corresponding Super Bowl, in a Supra-Super battle for national supremacy or, at least, as a stimulus for oddball water-cooler conversation. (It can get a little old talking about just football, or just Presidents, or just dinosaurs versus robots.) He called his tournament the America Bowl, the idea being that, as he put it last week, "the Presidency and the Super Bowl are the two things that you grow up learning are the pinnacle of American achievement." His teen-age son designed a logo, a generic football helmet going forehead to forehead at midfield with George Washington's ponytailed twenty-five-cent profile: concussion imminent. On December 27th, forty-two days before the actual big game, Steinberg started chronicling his hypothetical big games, one per day, on his Web site, Americabowl.net. "Which have been better?" he wrote. "Our Super Bowl games? Or our Presidents? Finally we can find out!"

The criteria are vague. The Presidents are judged, for the most part, by their accomplishments, and the games by their competitiveness, with points on either side for iconicness. Many of the early Super Bowls were duds, no match for the Framers. The sole gem, Super Bowl III—the upset of the Colts by Joe Namath's Jets—had the misfortune to line up against Thomas Jefferson, who, in Steinberg's final tally, "wanted it more." The kick is good: Presidents by three. By the time William Henry Harrison suited up, the margin had expanded to 7–1. His opponent, a Steelers defeat of the Vikings, in 1975, was a lousy entertainment (the score at halftime that year was a grim 2–0), but, as Steinberg remarks, "at least they played the whole thing," whereas Harrison died after just a month in office. ("JaMarcus Russell's holdout lasted longer.") By Saturday, the score was 9–5. "Presidents got into a slump before the Civil War," Steinberg said. Thanks for nothing, Franklin Pierce.



Abraham Lincoln vs. Joe Montana

"The America Bowl pulls together all of my favorite ways of wasting time," Steinberg, who majored in political science at Columbia and now writes mainly about boxing, went on. "I occasionally have weird ideas like this." Years ago, he came up with a calculation to determine the age, in human years, of any car (basically, you divide the mileage by the model year), and a boxing statistic called the Tyson Index (the percentage of scheduled rounds a guy fights shows how "knockouty" he is). Last year, he drew up a bracket featuring Obama Administration Cabinet nominees and America's favorite vegetables (the final pitted Hillary Clinton against the potato).

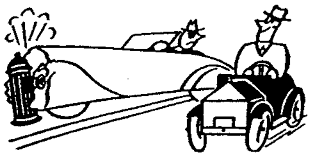
Some intriguing America Bowl matchups loom. For example, Teddy Roosevelt, who once threatened to ban football, on account of its violence ("That would have been a good move for the Presidents, strategically," Steinberg said), draws the Redskins-Bills game of 1992. It's not unthinkable that Nixon gets a win and Clinton a loss. Clinton's opponent is the Giants' upset, two years ago, of the Patriots—a Rushmore game, whatever one's allegiance.

One thing you notice, as you peruse the matchups, is that this country has had to endure a parade of unexceptional chief executives and championship football games. The Super Bowl, few will disagree, is a bloated, overhyped spectacle, and, more often than not, an anticlimax; this may also be true of the Presidency. Presidents, like Super Bowls, are almost always overburdened with import and expectation. They both tend to under-deliver—a thought worth keeping in mind when, a few weeks hence, Obama gives his first official State of the Union address, as a warmup to the big game.

In fact, the America Bowl's most difficult contest may be the final one, between 44 and XLIV. It's hard enough to assess any Presidency, much less one that's just a year old. As for the football, the playoffs, on the eve of the wild-card round, look wide open. (By the end of the weekend, a press-time prayer for Eagles-Jets will probably have already come to naught.) Steinberg said that he considered fixing the results of the America Bowl games leading up to this last one, so that it would be, as they say, meaningful—a possible tiebreaker—but forty-four is an even number, and, anyway, he is at heart more a sportsman than a historian or a political man.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

SCOFFLAW DEPT.
DASHBOARD DIVAS



The week before last, a white Dodge van with dark windows and no license plate sat parked in the middle of Times Square for at least two days without receiving a ticket. Tourists and office workers ambled around it until the day before New Year's Eve, when someone finally called the police, who sent out a bomb squad and a robot to inspect the vehicle before declaring it safe. For the most part, the incident was viewed as a cautionary tale about the war on terror: while our eyes are trained on the skies, our crosswalks remain vulnerable. But in some precincts it was seen as part of a smaller-scale war that has been going on longer: the war against parking placards. The van didn't raise alarm, police said, because its dashboard displayed a sign for a police fraternal organization, the Detectives Crime Clinic of New Jersey and New York. (The group said the placard may have been stolen; police said the van—which contained fake Burberry scarves—belonged to a sidewalk vender.)

The move was bold, but the tactic was familiar. Parking placards, like bobbleheads and fuzzy dice, are a long-standing feature of the landscape of urban windshields. They are distributed to city and state agencies—police, clergy, housing—to be used by workers when on official business. In practice, they are treated as twenty-four-hour parking passes, and are highly coveted. (In 2008, the *Post* reported a spate of break-ins in Washington Heights, where thieves smashed a number of car windshields to steal the placards within.) Tabloid photographers never tire of busting prominent placard-abusers. Reported offenders have included Kimora Lee Simmons, whose driver, a moonlighting prison guard, put up a Department of Corrections placard while taking her shopping at Barneys, and Ron Perelman, who, according to the *Post*, stuck a sign from a charity called the Federal Law Enforcement Foundation on the dashboard of his Yukon Denali S.U.V. (A spokesperson for Perelman said that the car in question belonged to an employee.) According to Wiley Norvell, the communications director for the pedestrian-advocacy group Transportation Alternatives, last week happened to be a big one for high-profile placard abuse: Justice A. Kirke Bartley, who presided over the Astor trial, was caught using a state-police placard to avoid feeding meters near his Upper East Side home; so was Pedro Espada, Jr., the State Senate majority leader, whose car was parked in front of a fire hydrant.

Mayor Bloomberg has cut the number of city-issued placards in recent years, but, Norvell said, the problem is systemic: because parking agents don't want to risk ticketing other civil servants, they don't enforce the rules. "If you can get away with throwing any old thing on your dashboard, it doesn't matter how many placards are issued," he said. The advocacy group has found placard substitutes to be as plentiful as fake Prada bags: patrol manuals, an M.T.A. vest, a firefighters' union card, a Bible with a note reading "Please Don't Ticket." The strictest enforcers may be other civilians. Peter Kaufman, a Bank of America I.T. technician, has mounted an online campaign against a church in Brooklyn Heights, whose members use laminated signs that say "Church Business" to park in a bike lane. Another activist, an Upper East Side resident who goes by the Internet handle Dick Tracy, has targeted the Park East Synagogue, whose workers have used homemade placards, and employees from the Fox 5 studio on East Sixty-seventh Street, who have used press placards (intended for reporters following breaking news) to park anywhere. In 2007, Arnold Diaz, the network's "Shame, Shame, Shame" reporter, was photographed getting into a white Subaru with a press placard in the windshield. "They're the plague and scourge of the neighborhood," Dick Tracy said, of Fox.

Last week, in a Times Square office not far from the spot where the suspicious van had been, another Brooklyn Heights resident, a female executive, produced a detailed log that she'd made documenting the parking habits of placard-abusers on Pierrepont Street. She said she'd kept the data to aid her in a letter-writing campaign to public officials. Offenders included judges, and a few doctors, one of whom parks on Pierrepont using a placard that says "Surgeon: This Vehicle Is on Official Medical Business/Fraternal Order of Police/Amtrak Police." The executive said, "I pay three hundred and sixty-five dollars a month to park my car in a garage. And these doctors and ex-doctors and children of doctors park for free. It's the sense of entitlement that just gets my goat."

One day, she confronted a woman and her mother, who were getting into an illegally parked black sedan with medical license plates, which often had a placard in the window. "I said, 'How do you like your parking space?'" the executive recalled. "And she said, 'I went to school for many years and worked very hard for this.' And I said, 'For a parking space?' And she said, 'Yes.' And her mother said to her, 'Close the window!'"

—*Lizzie Widdicombe*

ENCORE
PEE-WEE REDUX

Children (and cool grownups) of the eighties remember a brightly lit room with fifties wallpaper, whose inhabitants included a talking chair (Chairry), a talking clock (Clocky), a talking globe who sounded like Henry Kissinger (Globey), a window with googly eyes (Mr. Window), a blue genie head in a bejewelled box (Jambi), a cow in a tiara (the Cowntess), and a robot (Conky) who dispensed a daily "secret word," which, when it was spoken, would make all of the above scream real loud.

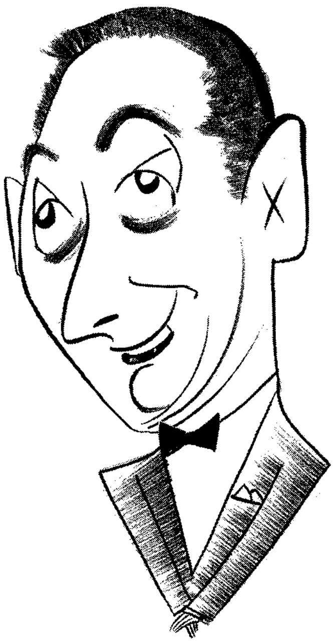
Presiding over the mayhem was a tall man in a too small suit named Pee-wee Herman, played by the actor Paul Reubens. "Pee-wee's Playhouse" ended its run, on CBS, in 1990, and the intervening years have been difficult for Reubens. He was arrested in 1991, for indecent exposure at an adult-movie theatre (he pleaded no contest), and again, in 2001, for possession of child pornography (those charges were later dropped, when he pleaded guilty to a lesser charge). As a result, Pee-wee has not been heard from for almost two decades. But, in the past few months, the character—puffier but no less manic—has been showing up on the "Tonight Show" and "Jay Leno," preparing the public for a comeback.

"I just woke up one day and felt like, Yeah, it's time," Reubens, who is fifty-seven, said the other day. He was at a diner in Los Angeles, following a rehearsal of "The Pee-wee Herman Show," which opens this week at Club Nokia. When not in character, Reubens is sedate, without a trace of Pee-wee. "Yesterday, we saw the pterodactyl"—Pterri—"fly," he said, in a near-whisper. He was wearing a black corduroy shirt, jeans, and a calculator watch.

Reubens first developed Pee-wee Herman (he took the name off a harmonica) in the nineteen-seventies, as a member of the L.A. improv troupe the Groundlings, and gained recognition performing in comedy clubs. That led to an HBO special, two movies—"Pee-wee's Big Adventure" (1985) and "Big Top Pee-wee" (1988)—and the Saturday-morning kids' show. But Pee-wee was never intended purely as a children's character, and the original act was full of racy humor, most of which was purged from the TV show. (There were exceptions, as when Cowboy Curtis, played by Laurence Fishburne, told Pee-wee, "You know what they say, big *feet*... big *boots!*") Reubens conceived the new stage show as a return to form, but things got tricky. "All these people were calling Ticketmaster saying, 'Can I bring my kids?'" he said. A heroin reference was cut. Reubens agonized over what to serve at snack time. "We always had healthy snack time on the TV show," he said. (He settled on onion rings.)

Even in its Saturday-morning incarnation, "Pee-wee's Playhouse" was more complex than other kids' shows, and it inspired a body of academic discourse. Bernard Welt, a professor of humanities at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, wrote that the series "was the first popular television show to build self-consciously on the anti-traditions of installation and performance art, while boldly exploring the inherent qualities of televisual form itself." Reubens said, "I don't even know what the second half of that means. Or the first half. But it *was* performance art. . . . Anywhere I went, people would call me Pee-wee. And I'd go out of my way to add to that, because I thought that conceptually it worked better if people weren't going, 'That's an actor doing that,' but really felt, Wow, good for him, going that far with his special needs."

Ian Balfour, an English professor at York University, postulated, in the journal *Camera Obscura*, "A principal effect of Pee-wee's histrionics, whatever the outcome of the episode, is to unsettle cultural codified notions of masculine and feminine, indeed to twist them around." Reubens shrugged. "When people write stuff like that, I want to go, like, 'Duh.'" He continued, "The show was really about celebrating diversity and saying it's O.K. to be different in any way that you're different, period. In seventh grade, I remember meeting these art kids who were, like, 'Hey, you got a minute? Sit down! Have you ever heard of nonconformity? Listen, this is what it is!' And, meanwhile, I'm, like, 'You're kidding. You mean there are people who *want* to be different?'"

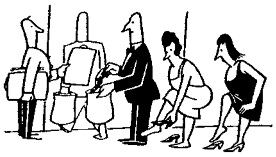


Pee-wee Herman

The new show will bring back several cast members, including the original Jambi and Miss Yvonne. "Laurence Fishburne was not available," Reubens said. "Same with S. Epatha Merkerson," who played Reba the Mail Woman and is now on "Law & Order." Reubens has ideas for two new Pee-wee movies. The first one is more family-friendly. "It's all the characters who should never leave the playhouse out on the road in an epic adventure story," he said. "The other one is about Pee-wee Herman becoming famous and turning into a monster."

—Michael Schulman

TRUE STORY
CRYSTAL BALL



So far, despite all the attention given to the wannabe terrorist from Nigeria widely known as the Underwear Bomber, nobody has mentioned that I predicted this turn of events. How many dead-on predictions does a person have to make to get a little credit around here? Am I implying that I've been similarly prescient in the past? Well, now that you mention it, yes. In a 1978 column about what was then being called the New Right, I said that I'd had some experience in the early sixties with the previous New Right, a movement most memorable for speeches that reached a level of boredom not witnessed in this country since members of the Communist Party droned their way through the thirties. Given the number of years between the two New Rights, I wrote, another New Right should be coming along around 1994. Sure enough, in 1994 a number of readers (three, if memory serves) wrote to remind me that my prediction had been uncannily correct: Newt Gingrich had led the Republicans in a historic takeover of Congress, and the press was full of stories about the power and vibrancy of the New Right.

A coincidence, you say? A lucky guess that I couldn't repeat? Wrong. In a book I published in 2006 called "A Heckuva Job: More of the Bush Administration in Rhyme," here is what I said, in one of the non-rhyming passages, about the so-called Shoe Bomber of 2001: "I'm convinced that the whole shoe-bomber business was a prank. What got me onto this theory was reading that the shoe bomber, a Muslim convert named Richard Reid, had been described by someone who knew him well in England as 'very, very impressionable.' I had already decided that the man was a complete bozo. He made such a goofy production of trying to light the fuses hanging off his shoe that he practically asked the flight attendant if she had a match. The way I figure it, the one terrorist in England with a sense of humor, a man known as Khalid the Droll, had said to the cell, 'I bet I can get them all to take off their shoes in airports.' So this prankster set up poor impressionable Reid and won his bet. Now Khalid is back there cackling at the thought of all those Americans exposing the holes in their socks on cold airport floors. If someone is arrested one of these days and is immediately, because of his M.O., referred to in the press as the underwear bomber, you'll know I was onto something."

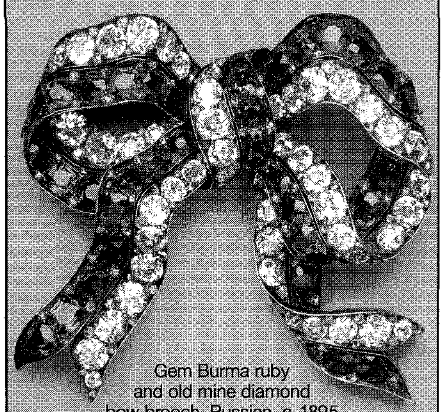
That's right: I predicted the Underwear Bomber in 2006. You could look it up. Around the same time, I repeated the prediction in public appearances and, as I remember, a couple of times on television. (I firmly believe that, in this world of ever-diminishing irreplaceable resources, using a line only once represents the sort of wastefulness our society can ill afford.) And what transpired on Christmas Day three years later? Another bozo tries to blow a hole in an airplane and succeeds only in setting his underpants aflame in a manner that might have rendered him ill equipped for the seventy-two heavenly virgins who were to be his reward if he succeeded. And how is this bozo described by friends and family? Naïve. And where was this bozo educated? University College London, within commuting distance of that diabolical trickster Khalid the Droll.

Has that name—Khalid the Droll—been mentioned even once in the endless press and television interviews with so-called security experts who prattle on about "connecting the dots" and "fostering interagency coöperation" and "eliminating stovepiping"? No, not once. Not once has anybody said, "Somebody should have followed up on Trillin's underwear tip." Not once has anybody considered the possibility that, after the shoe-bombing scheme worked to perfection, Khalid the Droll announced to his cell, "When they've had a few years of taking off their shoes, I bet I can make them expose their private parts to full-body scanners." Not once has one of these after-the-fact analyzers considered the possibility that, just as the thirties Communists and the early-sixties New Right tried to bore us into submission, Khalid the Droll is engaged in an elaborate scheme to embarrass us to death.

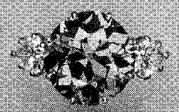
And what will be the next step in this scheme? I'm working on my prediction now. I just hope somebody is paying attention this time.

—Calvin Trillin

Antique Bow Brooch
(yellow gold back, silver top)



Gem Burma ruby
and old mine diamond
bow brooch, Russian, c. 1895
$122,500



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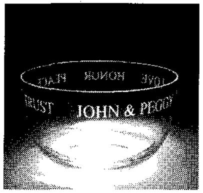

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ANNALS OF BUSINESS

THE SURE THING

How entrepreneurs really succeed.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

In 1969, Ted Turner wanted to buy a television station. He was thirty years old. He had inherited a billboard business from his father, which was doing well. But he was bored, and television seemed exciting. “He knew absolutely nothing about it,” one of Turner’s many biographers, Christian Williams, writes in “Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way” (1981). “It would be fun to risk everything he had built, scare the hell out of everybody, and get back in the front seat of the roller coaster.”

The station in question was WJRJ, Channel 17, in Atlanta. It was an independent station on the UHF band, the lonely part of the television spectrum which viewers needed a special antenna to find. It was housed in a run-down cinder-block building near a funeral home, leading to the joke that it was at death’s door. The equipment was falling apart. The staff was incompetent. It had no decent programming to speak of, and it was losing more than half a million dollars a year. Turner’s lawyer, Tench Coxe, and his accountant, Irwin Mazo, were firmly opposed to the idea. “We tried to make it clear that—yes—this thing might work, but if it doesn’t everything will collapse,” Mazo said, years later. “Everything you’ve got will be gone. . . . It wasn’t just us, either. Everybody told him not to do it.”

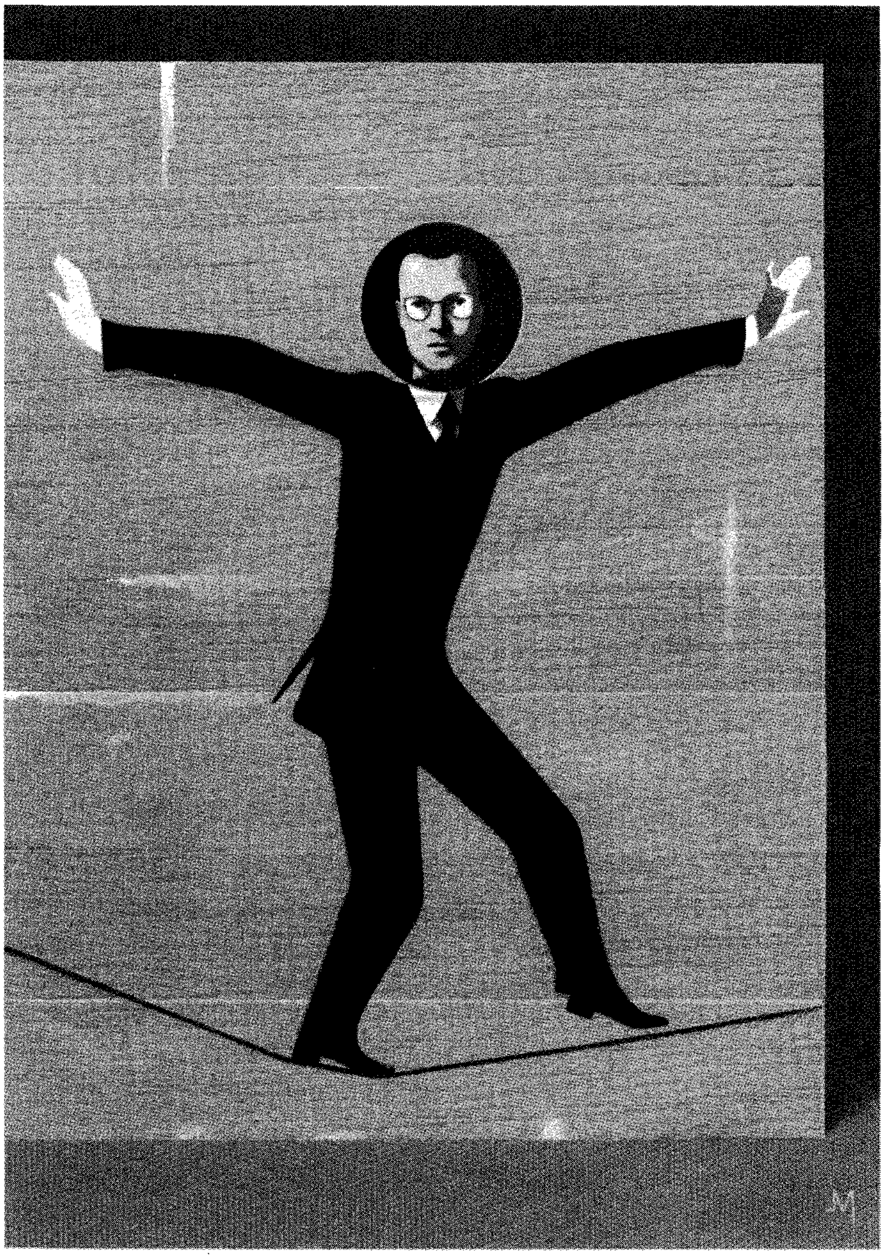
Turner didn’t listen. He was Captain Courageous, the man with nerves of steel who went on to win the America’s Cup, take on the networks, marry a movie star, and become a billionaire. He dressed like a cowboy. He gave the impression of signing contracts without looking at them. He was a drinker, a yeller, a man of unstoppable urges and impulses, the embodiment of the entrepreneur as risk-taker. He bought the station, and so began one of the great broadcasting empires of the twentieth century.

What is sometimes forgotten amid the mythology, however, is that Turner wasn’t the proprietor of any old billboard company. He had inherited the largest outdoor-advertising firm in the South, and billboards, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, were enormously lucrative. They benefitted from favorable tax-depreciation rules, they didn’t require much capital investment, and they produced rivers of cash. WJRJ’s losses could be used to offset the taxes on the profits of Turner’s billboard business. A television station, furthermore, fit very nicely into his existing business. Television was about selling ads, and Turner was very experienced at ad-selling. WJRJ may have been a virtual unknown in the Atlanta market, but Turner had billboards all over the city that were blank about fifteen per cent of the time. He could advertise his new station free. As for programming, Turner had a fix for that, too. In those days, the networks offered their local affiliates a full slate of shows, and whenever an affiliate wanted to broadcast local programming, such as sports or news, the national shows were preëmpted. Turner realized that he could persuade the networks in New York to let him have whatever programming their affiliates weren’t running. That’s exactly what happened. “When we reached the point of having four preempted NBC shows running in our daytime lineup,” Turner writes in his autobiography, “Call Me Ted” (2008), “I had our people put up some billboards saying ‘THE NBC NETWORK MOVES TO CHANNEL 17.’ ”

Williams writes that Turner was “attracted to the risk” of the deal, but it seems just as plausible to say that he was attracted by the deal’s lack of risk. “We don’t want to put it all on the line, because the result can’t possibly be worth the risk,” Mazo recalls warning Turner. Put it all on the line? The purchase price for WJRJ was $2.5 million. Similar properties in that era went for many times that, and Turner paid with a stock swap engineered in such a way that he didn’t have to put a penny down. Within two years, the station was breaking even. By 1973, it was making a million dollars in profit.

In a recent study, "From Predators to Icons," the French scholars Michel Villette and Catherine Vuillermot set out to discover what successful entrepreneurs have in common. They present case histories of businessmen who built their own empires—ranging from Sam Walton, of Wal-Mart, to Bernard Arnault, of the luxury-goods conglomerate L.V.M.H.—and chart what they consider the typical course of a successful entrepreneur's career. There is almost always, they conclude, a moment of great capital accumulation—a particular transaction that catapults him into prominence. The entrepreneur has access to that deal by virtue of occupying a "structural hole," a niche that gives him a unique perspective on a particular market. Villette and Vuillermot go on, "The businessman looks for partners to a transaction who do not have the same definition as he of the value of the goods exchanged, that is, who undervalue what they sell to him or overvalue what they buy from him in comparison to his own evaluation." He moves decisively. He repeats the good deal over and over again, until the opportunity closes, and—most crucially—his focus throughout that sequence is on hedging his bets and minimizing his chances of failure. The truly successful businessman, in Villette and Vuillermot's telling, is anything but a risk-taker. He is a predator, and predators seek to incur the least risk possible while hunting.

Giovanni Agnelli, the founder of Fiat, financed his young company with the money of investors—who were "subsequently excluded from the company by a maneuver by Agnelli," the authors point out. Bernard Arnault took over the Boussac group at a personal cost of forty million francs, which was a fraction of the "immediate resale value of the assets." The French industrialist Vincent Bolloré "took charge of the failing family company for almost nothing with other people's money." George Eastman, the founder of Kodak, shifted the financial risk of his new enterprise to his family and to his wealthy friend Henry Strong. IKEA's founder, Ingvar Kamprad, arranged to get his furniture made in Communist Poland for half of what it would cost him in Sweden. Marcel Dassault, the French aviation pioneer, did a study for the French Army that pointed out the value of propellers, and then took over a propeller manufacturer. When he started making planes for the military, he made sure he was paid in advance.



Successful entrepreneurs are seen as bold gamblers; in reality, they're highly risk-averse.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS MARTIN

People like Dassault and Eastman and Arnault and Turner are all successful entrepreneurs, businessmen whose insights and decisions have transformed the economy, but their entrepreneurial spirit could not have less in common with that of the daring risk-taker of popular imagination. Would we so revere risk-taking if we realized that the people who are supposedly taking bold risks in the cause of entrepreneurship are actually doing no such thing?

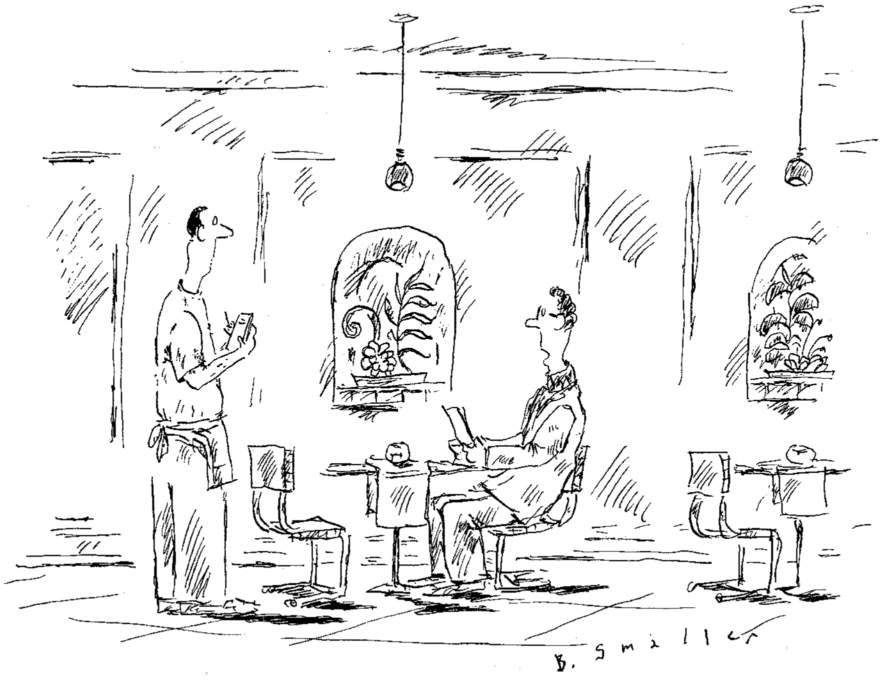
The most successful entrepreneur on Wall Street—certainly of the past decade and perhaps even of the postwar era—is a hedge-fund manager named John Paulson. He started a small money-management business in the nineteen-nineties and built it into a juggernaut, and Gregory Zuckerman's recent account of Paulson's triumph, "The Greatest Trade Ever," offers a fascinating perspective on the predator thesis.

Paulson grew up in middle-class Queens, the child of an immigrant father. His career on Wall Street started relatively slowly. He launched his firm in 1994, when he was nearly forty years old, specializing in merger arbitrage. By 2004, Paulson was managing about two billion dollars of other people's money, putting him in the middle ranks of hedge funds. He was, Zuckerman writes, a "solid investor, careful and decidedly unspectacular." The particular kinds of deal he did were "among the safest forms of investing."

One of Paulson's mentors was an investor named Marty Gruss, and, Zuckerman writes, "the ideal Gruss investment had limited risk but held the promise of a potential fortune. Marty Gruss drilled a maxim into Paulson: 'Watch the downside; the upside will take care of itself.' At his firm, he asked his analysts repeatedly, 'How much can we lose on this trade?'" Long after he became wealthy, he would take the bus to his offices in midtown, and the train out to his summer house on Long Island. He was known for getting around the Hamptons on his bicycle.

By 2004-05, Paulson was increasingly suspicious of the real-estate boom. He decided to short the mortgage market, using a financial tool known as the credit-default swap, or C.D.S. A credit-default swap is like an insurance policy. Wall Street banks combined hundreds of mortgages together in bundles, and investors could buy insurance on any of the bundles they chose. Suppose I put together a bundle of ten mortgages totalling a million dollars. I could sell you a one-year C.D.S. policy on that bundle for, say, a hundred thousand dollars. If after the year was up the ten homeowners holding those mortgages were all making their monthly payments, I'd pocket your hundred thousand. If, however, those homeowners all defaulted, I'd owe you the full value of the bundle—a million dollars. Throughout the boom, countless banks and investment firms sold C.D.S. policies on securities backed by subprime loans, happily pocketing the annual premiums in the belief that there was little chance of ever having to make good on the contract. Paulson, as often as not, was the one on the other side of the trade. He bought C.D.S. contracts by the truckload, and, when he ran out of money, he found new investors, raising billions of new dollars so he could buy even more. By the time the crash came, he was holding insurance on some twenty-five billion dollars' worth of subprime mortgages.

Was Paulson's trade risky? Conventional wisdom said that it was. This kind of deal is known, in Wall Street parlance, as a "negative-carry" trade, and, as Zuckerman writes, negative-carry trades are a "maneuver that investment pros detest almost as much as high taxes and coach-class seating." Their problem with negative-carry is that if the trade doesn't pay off quickly it can become ruinously expensive. It's one thing if I pay you a hundred thousand dollars for one year's insurance on a million dollars' worth of mortgages, and the mortgages go belly up after six months. But what if I pay premiums for two years, and the bubble still hasn't burst? Then I'm out two hundred thousand dollars, with nothing to show for my efforts. And what if the bubble hasn't burst after three years? Now I have a very nervous group of investors. To win at a negative-carry trade, you have not only to correctly predict the presence of a bubble but also to correctly predict when the bubble is about to burst.



"Which of tonight's specials is the most sanctimonious?"

At one point before the crash, Zuckerman writes, a trader at Morgan Stanley "hung up the phone after yet another Paulson order and turned to a colleague in disbelief. 'This guy is nuts,' he said with a chuckle, amazed that Paulson was agreeing to make so many annual insurance payments. 'He's just going to pay it all out?'" Wall Street thought that Paulson was crazy.

But Paulson wasn't crazy at all. In 2006, he had his firm undertake a rigorous analysis of the housing market, led by Paulson's associate Paolo Pellegrini. At that point, it was unclear whether rising housing prices represented a bubble or a legitimate phenomenon. Pellegrini concluded that housing prices had risen on average 1.4 per cent annually between 1975 and 2000, once inflation had been accounted for. In the next five years, though, they had risen seven per cent a year—to the point where they would have to fall by forty per cent to be back in line with historical trends. That fact left Paulson certain that he was looking at a bubble.

Paulson's next concern was with the volatility of the housing market. Was this bubble resilient? Or was everything poised to come crashing down? Zuckerman tells how Pellegrini and another Paulson associate, Sihan Shu, "purchased enormous databases tracking the historic performance of more than six million mortgages in various parts of the country." Thus equipped,

> they crunched the numbers, tinkered with logarithms and logistic functions, and ran different scenarios, trying to figure out what would happen if housing prices stopped rising. Their findings seemed surprising: Even if prices just flatlined, homeowners would feel so much financial pressure that it would result in losses of 7 percent of the value of a typical pool of subprime mortgages. And if home prices fell 5 percent, it would lead to losses as high as 17 percent.

This was a crucial finding. Most people at the time believed that widespread defaults on mortgages were a function of some combination of structural economic factors such as unemployment rates, interest rates, and regional economic health. That's why so many on Wall Street were happy to sell Paulson C.D.S. policies: they thought it would take a perfect storm to bring the market to its knees. But Pellegrini's data showed that the bubble was being inflated by a single, rickety factor—rising home prices. It wouldn't take much for the bubble to burst.

Paulson then looked at what buying disaster insurance on mortgages would cost. C.D.S. contracts can sometimes be prohibitively expensive. In the months leading up to General Motors' recent bankruptcy, for example, a year's insurance on a million of the carmaker's bonds sold for eight hundred thousand dollars. If Paulson had to pay anything like that amount, there wouldn't be much room for error. To his amazement, though, he found that to insure a million dollars of mortgages would cost him just ten thousand dollars—and this was for some of the most dubious and high-risk subprime mortgages. Paulson didn't even need a general housing-market collapse to make his money. He needed only the most vulnerable of all homeowners to start defaulting. It was a classic asymmetrical trade. If Paulson raised a billion dollars from investors, he could buy a year's worth of insurance on twelve billion dollars of subprime loans for a hundred and twenty million. That's an outlay of twelve per cent up front. But, Zuckerman explains,

> because premiums on CDS contracts, like those on any other insurance product, are paid out over time, the new fund could keep most of its money in the bank until the CDS bills came due, and thereby earn about 5 percent a year. That would cut the annual cost to the fund to a more reasonable 7 percent. Since Paulson would charge 1 percent a year as a management fee, the most an investor could lose would be 8 percent a year. . . . And the upside? If Paulson purchased CDS contracts that fully protected $12 billion of subprime mortgage bonds and the bonds somehow became worthless, Paulson & Co. would make a cool $12 billion.

"There's never been an opportunity like this," Paulson gushed to a colleague, as he made one bet after another. By "never," he meant never ever—not in his lifetime and not in anyone else's, either. In one of the book's many memorable scenes, Zuckerman describes how a five-point decline in what's called the ABX index (a measure of mortgage health) once made Paulson $1.25 billion in one morning. In 2007 alone, Paulson & Co. took in fifteen billion dollars in profits, of which four billion went directly into Paulson's pocket. In 2008, his firm made five billion dollars. Rarely in human history has anyone made so much money is so short a time.

What Paulson's story makes clear is how different the predator is from our conventional notion of the successful businessman. The risk-taking model suggests that the entrepreneur's chief advantage is one of temperament—he's braver than the rest of us are. In the predator model, the entrepreneur's advantage is analytical—he's better at figuring out a sure thing than the rest of us. Paulson looked at the same marketplace as everyone else on Wall Street did. But he saw a different pattern. As an outsider, he had fresh eyes, and his line of investing made him a lot more comfortable with negative-carry trades than his competitors were. He looked for and found partners to the transaction who did not have the same definition as he of the value of the goods exchanged—that is, the banks selling credit-default swaps for a penny on the dollar—and he exploited that advantage ruthlessly. At one point, incredibly, Paulson got together with some investment banks to assemble bundles of the most absurdly toxic mortgages—which the banks then sold to some hapless investors and Paulson then promptly bet against. As Zuckerman points out, this is the equivalent of a game of football in which the defense calls the plays for the offense. It's how a nerd would play football, not a jock.

This is exactly how Turner pulled off another of his legendary early deals—his 1976 acquisition of the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Turner's Channel 17 was the Braves' local broadcaster, having acquired the rights four years before—a brilliant move, as it turned out, because it forced every Braves fan in the region to go out and buy a UHF antenna. (Well before ESPN and Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV, Turner had realized how important live sports programming could be in building a television brand.) The team was losing a million dollars a year, and the owners wanted ten million dollars to sell. That was four times the price of Channel 17. "I had no idea how I could afford it," Turner told one of his biographers, although by this point the reader is wise to his aw-shucks modesty. First, he didn't pay ten million dollars. He talked the Braves into taking a million down, and the rest over eight or so years. Second, he didn't end up paying the million down. Somewhat mysteriously, Turner reports that he found a million dollars on the team's books—money the previous owners somehow didn't realize they had—and so, he says, "I bought it using its own money, which was quite a trick." He now owed nine million dollars. But Turner had already been paying the Braves six hundred thousand dollars a year for the rights to broadcast sixty of the team's games. What the deal consisted of, then, was his paying an additional six hundred thousand dollars or so a year, for eight years: in return, he would get the rights to all a hundred and sixty-two of the team's games, *plus the team itself.*

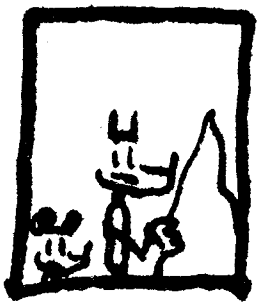
You and I might not have made that deal. But that's not because Turner is a risk-taker and we are cowards. It's because Turner is a cold-blooded bargainer who could find a million dollars in someone's back pocket that the person didn't know he had. Once you get past the more flamboyant aspects of Turner's personal and sporting life, in fact, there is little evidence that he had any real appetite for risk at all. In his memoir, Turner tells us that when he was starting out in the family business his father, Ed, bought another billboard firm, called General Outdoor. That was the acquisition that launched the Turner company as a major advertising player in the South, and it involved taking on a sizable amount of debt. Young Ted had no qualms, intellectually, about the decision. He could do the math. There were substantial economies of scale in the advertising business: the bigger you got, the lower your costs were, and paying off the debt from the General Outdoor purchase, Ted Turner realized, probably wasn't going to be a problem. But Turner's father did something that Turner, when he was building his empire, always went to extraordinary lengths to avoid: he put his own capital into the deal. In the highly unlikely event that it didn't work out, Turner Advertising would be crippled. It was a good deal, not a perfect one, and that niggling imperfection, along with the toll that the uncertainty was taking on his father, left Turner worried sick. "During the first six months or so after the General Outdoor acquisition my weight dropped from 180 pounds to 135," he writes. "I developed a pre-ulcerative condition and my doctor made me swear off coffee. I'd get so tired and agitated that one of my eyelids developed a twitch."

Zuckerman profiles John Paulson alongside three others who made the same subprime bet—Greg Lippmann, a trader at Deutsche Bank; Jeffrey Greene, a real-estate mogul in Los Angeles; and Michael Burry, who ran a hedge fund in

Silicon Valley—and finds the same pattern. All were supremely confident of their decision. All had done their homework. All had swooped down, like perfect predators, on a marketplace anomaly. But these were not men temperamentally suited to risk-taking. They worked so hard to find the sure thing because anything short of that gave them ulcers. Here is Zuckerman on Burry, as he waited for his trade to pan out:

> In a tailspin, Burry withdrew from his friends, family, and employees. Each morning, Burry walked into his firm and made a beeline to his office, head down, locking the door behind him. He didn't emerge all day, not even to eat or use the bathroom. His remaining employees, who were still pulling for Burry, turned worried. Sometimes he got into the office so early, and kept the door closed for so long, that when his staff left at the end of the day, they were unsure if their boss had ever come in. Other times, Burry pounded his fists on his desk, trying to release his tension, as heavy-metal music blasted from nearby speakers.

Paulson's story also casts a harsh light on the prevailing assumptions behind corporate compensation policies. One of the main arguments for the generous stock options that are so often given to C.E.O.s is that they are necessary to encourage risk-taking in the corporate suite. This notion comes from what is known as "agency theory," which Freek Vermeulen, of the London Business School, calls "one of the few academic theories in management academia that has actually influenced the world of management practice." Agency theory, Vermeulen observes, "says that managers are inherently risk-averse; much more risk-averse than shareholders would like them to be. And the theory prescribes that you should give them stock options, rather than stock, to stimulate them to take more risk." Why do shareholders want managers to take more risks? Because they want stodgy companies to be more entrepreneurial, and taking risks is what everyone says that entrepreneurs do.



The result has been to turn executives into risk-takers. Paulson, for his part, was stunned at the reckless behavior of his Wall Street counterparts. Some of the mortgage bundles he was betting against—collections of some of the sketchiest subprime loans—were paying the investors who bought them six-per-cent interest. Treasury bonds, the safest investment in the world, were paying almost five per cent at that point. Nor could he comprehend why so many banks were willing to sell him C.D.S. insurance at such low prices. Why would someone, in the middle of a housing bubble, demand only one cent on the dollar? At the end of 2006, Merrill Lynch paid $1.3 billion for First Franklin Financial, one of the biggest subprime lenders in the country, bringing the total value of subprime mortgages on its books to eleven billion dollars. Paulson was so risk-averse that he didn't so much as put a toe in the water of subprime-mortgage default swaps until Pellegrini had done months of analysis. But Merrill Lynch bought First Franklin even though the firm's own economists were predicting that housing prices were about to drop by as much as five per cent. "It just doesn't make sense," an incredulous Paulson told his friend Howard Gurvitch. "These are supposedly the smart people."

The economist Scott Shane, in his book "The Illusions of Entrepreneurship," makes a similar argument. Yes, he says, many entrepreneurs take plenty of risks—but those are generally the *failed* entrepreneurs, not the success stories. The failures violate all kinds of established principles of new-business formation. New-business success is clearly correlated with the size of initial capitalization. But failed entrepreneurs tend to be wildly undercapitalized. The data show that organizing as a corporation is best. But failed entrepreneurs tend to organize as sole proprietorships. Writing a business plan is a must; failed entrepreneurs rarely take that step. Taking over an existing business is always the best bet; failed entrepreneurs prefer to start from scratch. Ninety per cent of the fastest-growing companies in the country sell to other businesses; failed entrepreneurs usually try selling to consumers, and, rather than serving customers that other businesses have missed, they chase the same people as their competitors do. The list goes on: they underemphasize marketing; they don't understand the importance of financial controls; they try to compete on price. Shane concedes that some of these risks are unavoidable: would-be entrepreneurs take them because they have no choice. But a good many of these risks reflect a lack of preparation or foresight.

Shane's description of the pattern of entrepreneurial failure brings to mind the Harvard psychologist David McClelland's famous experiment with kindergarten children in the nineteen-fifties. McClelland watched a group of kids play ringtoss—throwing a hoop over a pole. The children who played the game in the riskiest manner, who stood so far from the pole that success was unlikely, also scored lowest on what he called "achievement motive," that is, the desire to succeed. (Another group of low scorers were at the other extreme, standing so close to the pole that the game ceased to be a game at all.) Taking excessive risks was, then, a psychologically protective strategy: if you stood far enough back from the pole, no one could possibly blame you if you failed. These children went out of their way to take a "professional" risk in order to avoid a personal risk. That's what companies are buying with their bloated C.E.O. stock-options packages—gambles so wild that the gambler can lose without jeopardizing his social standing within the corporate world. "As long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance," the now departed C.E.O. of Citigroup, Charles Prince, notoriously said, as his company continued to pile one dubious investment on another. He was more afraid of being a wallflower than he was of imperilling his firm.

The successful entrepreneur takes the opposite tack. Villette and Vuillermot point out that the predator is often quite happy to put his reputation on the line in the pursuit of the sure thing. Ingvar Kamprad, of IKEA, went to Poland in the nineteen-sixties to get his furniture manufactured. Since Polish labor was inexpensive, it gave Kamprad a huge price advantage. But doing business with a Communist country at the height of the Cold War was a scandal. Sam Walton financed his first retailing venture, in Newport, Arkansas, with money from his wealthy in-laws. That approach was safer than turning to a bank, especially since Walton was forced out of Newport and had to go back to his wife's family for another round. But you can imagine that it made for some tense moments at family reunions for a while.

Deutsche Bank's Lippmann, meanwhile, was called Chicken Little and Bubble Boy to his face for his insistence that the mortgage market was going to burst.

Why are predators willing to endure this kind of personal abuse? Perhaps they are sufficiently secure and confident that they don't need public approval. Or perhaps they are so caught up in their own calculations that they don't notice. The simplest explanation, though, is that it's just another manifestation of their relentlessly rational pursuit of the sure thing. If an awkward family reunion was the price Walton had to pay for a guaranteed line of credit, then so be it. He went out of his way to take a personal risk in order to avoid a professional risk. Reputation, after all, is a commodity that trades in the marketplace at a significant and often excessive premium. The predator shorts the dancers, and goes long on the wallflowers.

"They've got Hank on some of that medical marijuana."

• •

When Pellegrini finally finished his research on the mortgage market—proving how profoundly inflated home prices had become—he rushed in to show his findings to his boss. Zuckerman writes:

> "This is unbelievable!" Paulson said, unable to take his eyes off the chart. A mischievous smile formed on his face, as if Pellegrini had shared a secret no one else was privy to. Paulson sat back in his chair and turned to Pellegrini. "This is our bubble! This is proof. Now we can prove it!" Paulson said. Pellegrini grinned, unable to mask his pride. The chart was Paulson's Rosetta stone, the key to making sense of the entire housing market. Years later, he would keep it atop a pile of papers on his desk, showing it off to his clients and updating it each month with new data, like a car collector gently waxing and caressing a prized antique auto. . . . "I still look at it. I love that chart," Paulson says.

There are a number of moments like this in "The Greatest Trade Ever," when it becomes clear just how much Paulson enjoyed his work. Yes, he wanted to make money. But he was fabulously wealthy long before he tackled the mortgage business. His real motivation was the challenge of figuring out a particularly knotty problem. He was a kid with a puzzle.

This is consistent with the one undisputed finding in all the research on entrepreneurship: people who work for themselves are far happier than the rest of us. Shane says that the average person would have to earn two and a half times as much to be as happy working for someone else as he would be working for himself. And people who like what they do are profoundly conservative. When the sociologists Hongwei Xu and Martin Ruef asked a large sample of entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs to choose among three alternatives—a business with a potential profit of five million dollars with a twenty-per-cent chance of success, or one with a profit of two million with a fifty-per-cent chance of success, or one with a profit of $1.25 million with an eighty-per-cent chance of success—it was the entrepreneurs who were more likely to go with the third, safe choice. They weren't dazzled by the chance of making five million dollars. They were drawn to the eighty-per-cent chance of getting to do what they love doing. The predator is a supremely rational actor. But, deep down, he is also a romantic, motivated by the simple joy he finds in his work.

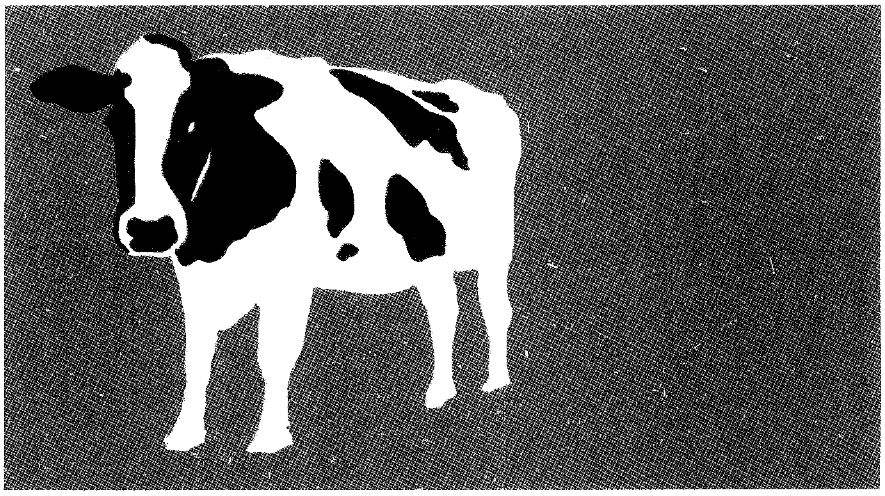
In "Call Me Ted," Turner tells the story of one of his first great traumas. When Turner was twenty-four, his father committed suicide. He had been depressed and troubled for some months, and one day after breakfast he went upstairs and shot himself. After the funeral, it emerged that the day before his death Turner's father had sold the crown jewels of the family business—the General Outdoor properties—to a man named Bob Naegele. Turner was grief-stricken. But he fought back. He hired away the General Outdoor leasing department. He began "jumping" the company's leases—that is, persuading the people who owned the real estate on which the General Outdoor billboards sat to cancel the leases and sign up with Turner Advertising. Then he flew to Palm Springs and strong-armed Naegele into giving back the business. Turner the rational actor negotiated the deal. But it was Turner the romantic who had the will, at the moment of his greatest grief, to fight back. What Turner understood was that none of his grand ambitions were possible without the billboard cash machine. He had felt the joy that comes with figuring out a particularly knotty problem, and he couldn't give that up. Naegele, by the way, asked for two hundred thousand dollars, which Turner didn't have. But Turner realized that for someone in Naegele's tax bracket a flat payment like that made no sense. He countered with two hundred thousand dollars in Turner Advertising stock. "So far so good," Turner writes in his autobiography. "I had kept the company out of Naegele's hands and it didn't cost me a single dollar of cash." Of course it didn't. He's a predator. Why on earth would he take a risk like that? ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

UDDER MADNESS

BY WOODY ALLEN

An article published . . . by the Centers for Disease Control [reported] that about 20 people a year are killed by cows in the United States. . . . In 16 cases, "the animal was deemed to have purposefully struck the victim," the report states. . . . All but one victim died from head or chest injuries; the last died after a cow knocked him down and a syringe in his pocket injected him with an antibiotic meant for the cow. In at least one case, the animal attacked from behind. —*The Times.*



If my account of the events of the last week seems jumbled, even hysterical, forgive me. I'm usually quite placid. Truth is, the details I'm about to relate are especially unnerving, taking place as they did in such a picturesque setting. Indeed, the Pudnicks' farm in New Jersey rivals any pastoral tableau by Constable, if not in acreage then certainly in bucolic tranquillity. A mere two hours from Broadway, where Sy Pudnick's latest musical, "The Flesh-Eating Virus," runs to packed houses, it is here, amid rolling hills and green meadows, that the celebrated lyricist comes to unwind and re-juice his muse. An avid weekend farmer, Pudnick and his wife, Wanda, grow their own corn, carrots, tomatoes, and a medley of other amateur crops, while their children play host to a dozen chickens, a pair of horses, a baby lamb, and yours truly. To say that for me the days up here are Shangri-La is not to oversell. I can graze, ruminate, and work over my cud, in harmony with nature, and get milked gently on schedule by Wanda Pudnick's Kiehl's-moisturized hands.

One thing I've particularly relished is when the Pudnicks invite guests to stay over on weekends. What a joy for an intellectually underrated creature like myself to be in proximity to New York's fabulous glitterati: to eavesdrop on actors, journalists, painters, and musicians, all exchanging ideas and witty anecdotes that may be a bit swift for the poultry, but nobody appreciates a good Anna Wintour story or a freshly minted Steve Sondheim song more than I do, especially when Steve's playing it. That's why when included in last week's A-list was a writer-director in cinema with a long list of credits although I was unfamiliar with the titles I anticipated a particularly scintillating Labor Day. When I heard that this auteur sometimes took the lead in his own pictures I envisioned a filmmaker-movie star as formidable as Orson Welles and as handsome as Warren Beatty or John Cassavetes. Imagine my surprise when I lamped the triple threat I speak of and registered neither a brooding cult genius nor a matinée idol but a wormy little cipher, myopic behind

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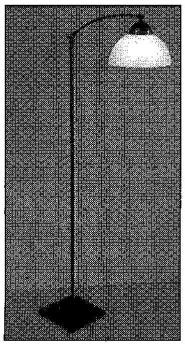

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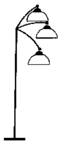

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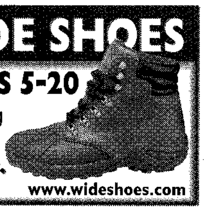

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black-framed glasses and groomed loutishly in his idea of rural chic: all tweedy and woodsy, with cap and muffler, ready for the leprechauns. The creature proved a handful from the very first, grumbling to all about the muddled directions that had forced his chauffeur to squander hours driving around in a Möbius route, the expense of tolls and leaded regular, and the unanticipated effect of local mold spores on his precarious adenoids. Finally, I heard him demand that a wooden board be placed under his mattress, which he found too soft to appease a spine clearly en route to osteoporosis. Mr. Pudnick recalled that David Mamet had once mentioned changing planes when he heard this individual was on the same flight. I might add that the character's incessant carping was done in a kazoolike nasal whine, as were his incessant jokes: a spate of fatal snappers designed to ingratiate but eliciting from all within earshot a columbarium-like silence.

Lunch was served on the lawn, and our friend, made bolder, thanks to a certain Mr. Glenfiddich, proceeded to hold court on subjects he hadn't a clue about. Misquoting La Rouchefoucauld, he confused Schubert with Schumann and then attributed to Shakespeare "Man does not live by bread alone," which even I recognized as coming from Deuteronomy. Corrected, he became peevish and offered to arm-wrestle the hostess to prove a point. Mid-meal, the insufferable little nudnick beat his glass for attention and then attempted yanking the tablecloth from the table without upsetting the china. I needn't tell you that this proved to be a major holocaust, forever ruining at least one J. Mendel dress, and catapulting a baked potato into the cleavage of a tony brunette. After lunch, I saw him move his croquet ball with his foot, thinking himself unwatched.

As the accumulation of single malt took its toll on his capillaries, he slurred invective against the New York critics for failing to consider his last movie, "Louis Pasteur Meets the Wolfman," for honors. By now he had begun eyeballing the comelier types, and, clasping some actress's hand with his rodent's paw, whispered, "Little minx, I sense by those high cheekbones that you have Cherokee blood in you." Tact personified, the woman somehow resisted the impulse to grab his nose with her fist and give it several turns counterclockwise till it made a ratcheting noise.

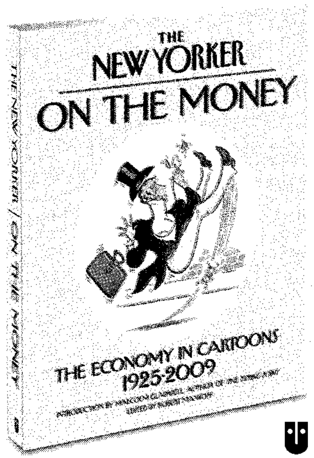
It was at this point that I decided to kill him. After all, would the world really miss this fatuous little suppository, with his preening self-confidence and emetic cuteness? At first I thought of trampling the bespectacled vontz, but I felt that to do the job properly I'd need about two hundred more head to really stomp him good. There were no rocky cliffs where I could brush against the wretch with a little hip action and send him plummeting. Then it hit me. A nature walk had been mentioned, and all were anxious to participate. All, that is, except for a certain cringing homunculus, who carried on like Duse over the prospect of being in the woods among Lyme ticks and poison oak. He chose to remain in his room and make phone calls to check on the grosses of his new movie, which *Variety* had said would have limited appeal and suggested should open in Atlantis. My plan was to enter the house, sneak up on him from behind, and strangle the nattering little carbuncle with a sash. With everyone away, it would appear to the police to be the work of a drifter. The thought occurred to plant a fingerprint belonging to Dropkin, the handyman who once gave the Pudnicks one of those diagrams showing the outline of a body like mine and where the best cuts of meat come from.

At 4 P.M. I went to the barnyard and made sure the chickens saw me there. I walked slowly by the stable, clanging the bell around my neck to further establish an alibi. From there I strolled casually to the rear of the house. The doors were locked and I had to enter through a window, causing some carnage to a nearby table bearing a pair of Tiffany lamps. I tiptoed up the stairs, hooves en pointe, having a close call only when Paucity, the maid, came down the hall bearing fresh towels, but quickly I flattened up in the shadows against the corridor wall and she walked right by. Silently, I slipped into my intended victim's room and waited for him to return from the kitchen, where he was raiding the refrigerator for leftovers. Alone there, he had cobbled together a costly sturgeon-and-beluga sandwich, ladling the bagel with a tsunami of cream cheese, then made his way back upstairs. Hidden in the closet nearest to his bed, I was awash in existential angst. If Raskolnikov had been a bovine creature, a Holstein, say, or perhaps a Texas longhorn, would the story have turned out differently? Suddenly he entered the room, snack in one hand, a vintage port in the other. Gathering all the stealth at my command I nosed the closet door open and silently stood behind him, clutching the sash—not an easy feat for a creature without opposable thumbs. Slowly I raised it and prepared to slip it around his throat and choke the breath of life out of the salivating four-eyed pygmy.

Suddenly, as fate would have it, my tail got caught in the closet door and I let out a loud lowing sound, a moo, if you will. He spun around now and our eyes met, his beady and darting, mine large and brown. Seeing me up on my hind legs about to do him in, he emitted a soprano bleat not unlike a particular note that Dame Joan Sutherland hits in the Pudnicks' Decca recording of "Siegfried." The sound alerted the multitude downstairs, who had returned when it began to rain. I panicked and stampeded toward the bedroom door, trying to body-English the stricken little measle out the window as I hustled away. Meanwhile, he produced a cannister of Mace he always carries, which did not surprise me, given the amount of enemies he must make. He tried spraying it in my face but, shmendrick that he is, he held it backward and succeeded only in crop-dusting his own wizened map. By now the household was bounding up the stairs. With a fox's cunning I grabbed the bedside lampshade, snapped it over my head, and stood immobile while others transported the wailing pustule out the door, into an S.U.V., and off to the nearest hospital.

Later stories around the barn have it that he babbled incoherently all the way, and even a subsequent two nights at Bellevue failed to restore his reason. I know the Pudnicks have removed him from their BlackBerry and poured gasoline on his phone number, setting it ablaze. After all, he's not just a social grub but a raving paranoid, endlessly mouthing something about attempted homicide by a Hereford. ♦

A hilarious look at the American economy through the timeless cartoons of *The New Yorker.*



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THE WORLD OF FASHION

TWISTED SISTERS

The designers behind Rodarte.

BY AMANDA FORTINI

Two people to lace a single boot, two boots per model, thirty-five models: this was the problem facing Kate and Laura Mulleavy, the pair of sisters behind the Los Angeles-based fashion label Rodarte, one morning last February, less than an hour before their fall, 2009, runway show was scheduled to begin. One person steadied the boot as another laced it, crisscrossing the straps like ribbons on a ballet shoe. The sisters had collaborated on the thigh-high leather boots (which, as one blogger put it, "seemed to go all the way up to the lady business") with Nicholas Kirkwood, the twenty-nine-year-old British shoe designer known for his architectural and vertiginous footwear, and the finished look was supposed to evoke "hands wrapped in plastic in a morgue"—a grotesquerie that Laura had witnessed in a biology class.

The show was being held at the Gagosian gallery, on the far West Side of Manhattan. In a cordoned-off portion of the austere white space, Laura and Kate were coaching a makeshift team of thirty-odd volunteers: students from the Fashion Institute of Technology, several interns, and a few friends. Some were herding the models to hair and makeup stations, or sliding dresses over their asparagus-stalk bodies; most were lacing and relacing the recalcitrant boots. Kate, who is zaftig and often fretful, noticed that a group of models were still in their underwear. "Why aren't they dressed?" she asked, sighing. "Why don't they have boots on?" Nearby, Laura, unflustered, turned her attention to a rack of leather jackets, which, like the boots, had the look of bondage gear: tiers of straps that buckled at the midriff and around each arm. She started to fit one onto a model, pulling each strap tightly across the girl's torso and buckling it, then repeated the process with the smaller versions that encircled the arms. "Please don't move so much," she told the tightly encased model. "I want to *seet*," the girl wailed. Laura, who is maniacal about the fit of the clothing, said, "You can't sit down," and removed a pair of scissors from her pocket to trim superfluous bits of leather from the tiny belts on the sleeves. The model scowled. "I know. It sucks," Laura said. "I'm sorry."

People have a difficult time telling the Mulleavy sisters apart. Both have glossy brown hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. (Their mother is Mexican-Italian, and their father is Irish.) Laura, who is twenty-nine, is thinner, with wavier hair and sharper features. Kate, who is thirty, has larger eyes and a rounder face. Both women had on black cardigan sweaters—Kate's was the sort a frumpy older lady might wear, spangled with crystal appliqués—and black ballet flats. They do not attempt the six-inch heels they routinely send down the runway. "Are you *kidding*?" Kate said when I asked.

Physical differences aside, the sisters act like a single organism. They share an e-mail account, and send unsigned e-mails, making it impossible to know which one you're corresponding with. They used to share a cell phone as well. "We didn't realize it was weird," Kate said. Their conversation is a polyphonic composition of free associations, digressions, and interruptions; they often finish each other's thoughts. Autumn de Wilde, a photographer who has been documenting their shows since the first collection, is close to both sisters. "I've never had a best friend that's two people before this," she said. "Kate has many times told me a story, and Laura will say, 'Kate, you weren't there, I was,' and will continue the story."

The designers live in Pasadena, far outside the fashion industry's axes of influence (New York, Paris, Milan, London); until mid-2006, when they rented a studio in downtown Los Angeles, they designed at the kitchen table in their parents' two-bedroom bungalow. And yet, in just under five years, Kate and

Laura have become the most celebrated American designers working today. Their small company, which produces only a thousand pieces a year and has no outside financial backing and minimal profits—"What profit we make goes back into research and development, and into making samples for the next season," their father, William (Perry) Mulleavy, who now acts as the C.F.O. and "business adviser," wrote in an e-mail—has become one of the most talked-about (and imitated) labels in fashion. You might say the outsider artists have become consummate insiders. The question, now, is whether their reach can extend beyond the avant-garde.

Fifteen minutes before the show was to begin, more than half the models still had to be directed to a "spraying station," where their boots were shellacked with leather paint. Two days earlier, the boots had arrived in a lighter shade of gray than the sisters had envisioned. They were sent to be re-dyed, but the paint kept rubbing off and had to be reapplied minutes before each model was launched down the runway. "I was trying to be, like, 'Maybe it will look cool the way it is,' because I knew it was going to be a total drama if we sprayed them," Shirley Kurata, a stylist and a friend of the Mulleavys', said. "But they were, like, 'No, it's not going to look good,' and they were right."

At twelve-thirty, a half hour late, the models began to glide past the audience, a crowd of fashion editors and celebrities (Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue;* Olivier Zahm, the editor of *Purple Fashion;* the stylist Rachel Zoe; the hipster-actresses Milla Jovovich and Kirsten Dunst). The outfits paired with the extra-long boots were uniformly short—tunic-style dresses and knit miniskirts—and came in unobtrusive shades of gray, taupe, cream, and black, occasionally inflected with electric blue, dark and sea-foam greens, bronze, or mustard. The unvarying backdrop of the garments provided a canvas on which the sisters had created assemblages of fabric. Booth Moore, the Los Angeles *Times* fashion critic, wrote, "With this collection, I wouldn't know whether to wear the dress or hang it on the wall."

The arts-and-crafts theme was carried through knit skirts, dresses, and sweaters, which evoked shag carpets or latch-hook wall hangings. Some of the fabrics had been "marblized"—dipped in paint to produce a swirled effect. Not everyone was a fan of the sisters' idiosyncratic methods, however. Cathy Horyn, the fashion critic for the New York *Times*, wrote in her review of the show, "All those scarred fabrics are essentially ornament; the underlying shapes don't change much, and they're not interesting. Indeed you wonder if they are bored or intimidated by the actual mechanics of design—cutting, setting a sleeve—and that what their clothes express isn't technical virtuosity but inarticulateness."

Most of the time, the Mulleavys' dresses hover mysteriously at the point where balanced meets busy, and beautiful meets baroque. But their recent designs, while arresting, do not perform the simple duty of most women's clothing—to make the wearer look either pretty or sexy. "The most unhappy Laura and I have ever been was when we heard that we made 'a pretty dress,'" Kate told me. "We want to make people think, and, once you decide to do that, you will have people that won't like

Laura and Kate Mulleavy: "We don't know anything about what we're doing but our instincts." Photograph by Nan Goldin.

what you're doing." Over time, their vision has grown darker, their clothing riskier, more deconstructed, punk, and gothic. Each collection has been stranger than the last, influenced by anime and horror films, and elements of S&M culture. "Rodarte is the fashion equivalent of a Basquiat," a writer for the New York *Observer* remarked. "People in the know really love it, but to everyone else it's inscrutable or a little bit ugly."

Although their clothing is considered ready-to-wear, the sisters use couture-like methods. They often speak of "building" a dress. To create their garments, which tend to include a multitude of textiles (and finicky ones, like tulle, organza, leather, and lace), adornments (crystals, feathers, rosettes), and techniques (draping, pleating, dyeing), the Mulleavys work with a team of three seamstresses, a pattern-maker, a dyer, a leather worker, and three knitters. One mid-length yellow chiffon dress from the 2006 fall collection took a hundred and fifty hours to complete. The edge of each of its thirty-plus pleats was beaded, by hand, with vintage Swarovski crystals. The prices reflect the painstaking labor: a multicolored draped silk tulle gown from their 2009 spring collection that was hand-dyed and decorated with crystal beading across the bodice retailed for twenty-five thousand dollars; another draped silk tulle dress from the previous season, this one white, knee-length, wrapped with twine, and spattered a bloody horror-flick red (an effect that took a month to perfect), cost nine thousand dollars.

Rodarte garments are thus worn only by those with enough money to buy them (the socialite-dermatologist Lisa Airan, the San Francisco-based couture collector Christine Suppes) or enough influence to borrow them (the actresses Cate Blanchett and Tilda Swinton). Michelle Obama wore a demure taupe linen Rodarte dress to receive Queen Rania, of Jordan, at the White House, and was photographed in a poufy orange lamé Rodarte frock at a ceremony at the Copenhagen Opera House. Natalie Portman and Reese Witherspoon wore Rodarte to the 2009 Oscars. (Portman's bubble-gum-pink Grecian-inspired strapless gown was a hit; Witherspoon's royal-blue-and-black gown, with shoulder sashes that made her look as if she were wearing a Baby Björn, was not.) Many of the designers' supporters are in the odd position of not being able to own Rodarte themselves. "I am not necessarily able to buy their clothes, because they're on the high end of the price range, and I'm a working girl," Julie Gilhart, the fashion director at Barneys, told me.

Items from Rodarte's spring, 2010, collection, which was shown in September, at the Gagosian gallery.

AUTUMN DE WILDE

Neither Mulleavy sister has any formal fashion training. "We don't know anything about what we're doing but our instincts," Kate says. As young girls, they became interested in clothing through films like "Bringing Up Baby" and "Gone with the Wind." In high school, the sisters subscribed to *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. But at Berkeley Kate majored in art history and Laura in English literature, after leaving her pre-med track ("I was always crying," she says). "Fashion didn't seem like a reality," Laura told me. "It didn't seem like an attainable job, like something you could do." They signed up for a costume-design class together, which they both dropped. "Laura was, like, 'I'm not doing this,' and I remember I stayed a little longer," Kate said. After a disastrous presentation in which she reënvisioned "Twelfth Night" as the movie "Shampoo," Kate decided to leave the class, too. "I was, like, 'No one gets my references to blow-dryers and Shakespeare, and I am so out of here.'"

The sisters learned basic sewing techniques from their mother, Victoria, an artist who painted, did ceramics, and created mosaics. (The name Rodarte, pronounced "Rodar-tay," comes from her maiden name, Rodart; the "e" was dropped when her parents emigrated from Mexico.) "We had the kind of mom that was, like, 'I want you to stay home for a week from school because you haven't seen all the Hitchcock films,'" Kate said. Their father, a fourth-generation Californian and a botanist who identified a new species of fungus, is also detail-oriented and free-spirited. During the early years of their marriage, the Mulleavys lived in an unheated cabin in a redwood forest. The parents' "rebellious" choices liberated their daughters. "They were doing things that were outside of perceptions of normal," Kate told me. "They weren't, like, part of this mainstream life style."

After graduating, in January, 2002 (Kate stayed a semester longer, Laura left a semester early), the sisters moved back home. There they watched horror movies "literally for a year." They also began reading couture-sewing books. By mid-2004, with money saved from a cancelled graduation trip to Italy and the sale of Kate's collection of rare albums (a first pressing of the Velvet Underground's self-titled début album, Lou Reed's "Berlin," X's "Los Angeles"), they had cobbled together sixteen thousand five hundred dollars to start their line. Laura later contributed funds by waitressing at a local restaurant. I asked Kate what she did while her sister worked. "I don't know," she said. "I was just thinking about stuff, I guess." In six months, they had created seven dresses and three coats.

The long, slim dresses in this initial collection—flowing, ethereal, delicate, if somewhat precious—were modelled on the redwood trees of their childhood in Aptos, a small town near Santa Cruz. At the time, the sisters were interested in playing with texture, for which tree bark served as a metaphor; they pleated and tucked their garments like textile origami, fraying the edges with pinking shears. These methods gave their essentially classical gowns an unleashed quality. They sent a quirky, flattering note—a doll in a little armoire containing miniature paper versions of their seven dresses—to Cameron Silver, the proprietor of Decades, a vintage store in Los Angeles, asking him to view their collection. He agreed to meet with them and assess the clothes. "It could have been a Tim Gunn moment," Silver says, alluding to the "Project Runway" host and the shoddy designs he has to endure. "But I was just blown away."

Silver phoned buyers and editors in New York, and the Mulleavys made their first trip to Manhattan, where they schlepped their tiny collection around in a cardboard box. *Women's Wear Daily* invited the sisters to bring their pieces to the magazine's office; three days later, on February 3, 2005, their designs appeared on the cover of *WWD*, an auspicious (and unheard-of) début. Soon afterward, Anna Wintour turned up in Los Angeles for a viewing. "She said, 'What you're doing is very personal,'" Laura recalls. " 'You should keep it that way.' Which I think is the best advice we've ever received from anybody." Wintour has since become a tireless promoter of their work. In less than five years, Rodarte has been mentioned in *Vogue* dozens of times. "*Vogue* and some of the other magazines seem determined to keep them in front of us," Cathy Horyn wrote in the *Times*.

Early one Sunday evening last February, on the eve of Fashion Week in Paris, Sarah Lerfel, the co-founder of Colette—a Parisian shop that sells rare designer labels, bizarre techno-gadgets, and T-shirts with peculiar sayings ("OCD," "Art Damage," "J'Aurais Dû Faire Finance")—was leading Kate, Laura, and their publicist, Brian Phillips, on a tour of the store. The sisters were there to discuss the "pop-up" shop they would create in Colette's second-floor retail-and-gallery space.

Like Anna Wintour, Lerfel was an early adopter of the Rodarte label, beginning with the 2006 fall collection, the Mulleavys' second. "Colette was one of our first five stores," Laura noted. (Rodarte mounted its first show in the fall of 2005, with its 2006 spring collection; runway time always anticipates civilian time by half a year.) During Paris Couture Week in 2006, Rodarte displayed three confections of organza and chiffon in the windows of Colette. Karl Lagerfeld stopped by and bought a black georgette-and-satin dress with a high neck and signature Rodarte "waves" fluttering down the bodice and at the cuffs, for his muse, Lady Amanda Harlech. "I saw this hand with amazing rings on it touching a dress," recalls Kate, who, with Laura, happened to be in the store at the time. "And then I felt that hand tap me on the shoulder, and Lagerfeld said something like he thought the dresses were special, and he was going to buy one. I was in shock."

Lerfel, a gamine Frenchwoman with close-cropped hair, led the group downstairs to the shop's café. Kate pulled a crumpled piece of loose-leaf notebook paper out of a canvas tote printed with an image of Proust. "I kind of like the idea of creating a teenage girl's bedroom," she said. "I thought we could do stuffed animals, like Teddy bears and giant rabbits, made of our knits." Her voice shook a little; she was speaking with her hand in front of her mouth. "Kate doesn't drive, so Laura drives her everywhere, and the payback is that Kate has to speak," the artist Ari Marcopoulos told me. " 'You have to talk, because I'm driving you around,' Laura will say. That's how they work together."

Kate mentioned some other ideas: several zines (small booklets of photocopied images) organized around different themes, and a set of mixtapes created by Thurston Moore, of the band Sonic Youth. The sisters are fond of collaborating with friends on various projects. These often consist of photo shoots and interviews in art-fashion journals—an esoteric universe whose members talk mainly to one another. The Colette show, which opened in October, included "art works" by several members of their posse: party hats by Autumn de Wilde, pillowcases by Miranda July, a gumball machine by the actor Jason Schwartzman.

Lerfel asked the sisters what they had in mind for the zines. "We want to do one with Ari," Kate said, referring to Marcopoulos. "We have a mutual obsession with the West. I thought the others could be based on my obsessions. One of them is the flooding of Florence in the sixties. And then one is of the Dust Bowl, and Steinbeck, and when they had all those crazy things happening in the early thirties in the United States."

Lerfel looked confused. "What?"

"The Dust Bowl."

"Spell it?' Lerfel asked.

"D-U-S-T Bowl," Phillips said slowly. "I don't know how you describe it."

"It's, like, basically the 'Grapes of Wrath,' you know, like in the Depression in the United States," Kate explained.

The group discussed several other ideas before Lerfel's expression grew serious. "What you have to know is it's coming *su-pere* fast, and it's something from now to work on non-stop, because we cannot have last-minute *sheeping*," Lerfel said, her tone parental. "I talked to you about some of these things, like, two years ago, and that's the thing which really, really scares me, because I know you're passionate, and you love everything and everything—"

"No, we are going to do it," Phillips reassured her.

"Brian, we have to do this—I'm *dying*," Kate said.

"We're going to do it," Phillips repeated.

"He's going to monitor us," Kate told Lerfel. "Don't worry."

The Rodarte studio is a modest L-shaped loft apartment in the former Federal Reserve Building in downtown Los Angeles, containing two drafting tables, at which Kate and Laura sit, and a small desk in one corner where Andy, their lone full-time employee, quietly makes phone calls. Between three and five unpaid interns scuttle around; mostly, they appear to be occupied with fetching coffee. With its two walls of art books arranged by color ("Laura does that," Kate said), its bathroom filled with toiletries for the occasional all-nighter, and its many stuffed animals and toys, the space has the feel of a dorm room. On the refrigerator in the galley kitchen, a note from Anna Wintour has been tacked up: "Dear Kate and Laura, Thanks for the flowers. I'm happy you are as pleased with the May issue as I am."

When I visited on Memorial Day, the Mulleavys were at work on their 2010 spring collection, which would be shown in September. Off to one side were two large bulletin boards on which the sisters had pinned a series of inspirational images photocopied from books: pictures of Degas's famous ballerina sculpture, two paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, California condors, and the atomic bomb being tested in the Nevada desert. Each collection begins with a constellation of such images, and from there a loose theme arises. The muted colors and marbled fabrics in the 2009 fall collection were intended to resemble granite, slate, marble: "the materials used in the structure of a home," the designers wrote in an e-mail. The idea arrived when the sisters drove by a cluster of dilapidated houses alongside the freeway. For their 2008 fall collection, which was inspired by Japanese horror films, the textiles were meant to look as though they were bleeding or "covering a seeping wound."

The sisters spend months either inventing their own "techniques" or, more commonly, working with artisans to alter fabric by, say, pleating, beading, or dyeing it. Only then do they move on to the designs. Kate does all the formal sketching. "I can't draw," Laura says. In a 2006 article in *Vogue*, Kate referred to their process as "manipulating simpler textiles into really complicated things."

For the upcoming collection, the Mulleavys had decided on a new technique. "We're going to burn everything; it's like opening Pandora's box," Kate said. They were testing scraps of fabric to see how various materials would respond. The results would offer an antidote to "high gloss, high fashion, glamour, put-together, shiny, perfect—everything too exact," as Laura put it. Kate added, "The other day, we were laughing that if we could take our clothes and bury them, and in ten years pull them out, we would actually be satisfied." (Another designer had beat them to it: in 1993, for his graduate collection at Central St. Martins, Hussein Chalayan buried silk dresses and later exhumed them.)

Both women were seated in desk chairs, with several piles of fabric samples at their feet. For the next four hours, they sorted through them. Laura recorded their verdicts in her laptop, while Kate ate a sandwich and absent-mindedly pulled at the skin on her neck.

Laura held up a scrap of beige silk. "I think this one is retarded," Kate told her. "Bor-*ing*."

Next, a shiny piece of terra-cotta-colored lamé. "I feel like it's a little fussy," Kate said.

Of a strip of rough brown linen with quasi-leopard-print spots: "Too eighties Mudd Club."

Laura held up a swatch of cream jersey with a raised, wavy texture that suggested sand dunes. "Desert-y," she said to herself.

So far, all the designers knew about this collection's theme was that the desert and condors would play a part; they had travelled to Death Valley earlier that spring with their friend Johnson Hartig, the designer of the label Libertine. They were searching without success for an example of a color that they called "condor red," a chalky, dusty red that would resemble the faded, rubbery skin of a condor's head and wattle.

"Ready? Because this is out of control," Kate said, waving a square of embroidered gray tulle in Laura's face. "If this were white with rust on it, it would be *off the charts*," she added.

Laura began typing furiously on her laptop. She was e-mailing a mill. "Ask them if we can customize," Kate told her. When a color or print or texture exists only in their imaginations, they work with a fabric mill to develop it. These transactions can be difficult. Small lots of fabric tend to be a low priority, and the mills tack on surcharges.

Laura pulled a sample of sea-foam-green polyester from a little heap near her feet.

"I hate that," Kate said sourly.

"Me, too."

"Like, why do they even make it?"

"Should we burn it?" Laura wanted to know. "Who has the lighter?" She got up and walked a few feet to the bathroom with the sea-foam-green bit in her hand. The chemical smell of burning polyester wafted through the studio. "Stinky," she said. Back in her chair, she rooted around on the floor until she found a scrap of silver lamé.

"I hate that," Kate said.

"It's awful. Let's burn it." She held it away from her body and torched it with the lighter. The edges of the fabric began to flicker and curl. As the flame seared through the material, it left a scorched lunar landscape in its wake.

"Cool," Laura said.

If there is any doubt about *Vogue's* hand in anointing new designers, one has only to look to the industry's prize circuit, which provides an infusion of cash and prestige at a critical moment in a fledgling career. Since 2006, the Mulleavys have been awarded approximately two hundred and ten thousand dollars in fashion-industry prizes—including twenty-five thousand dollars for the Ecco Domani Fashion Foundation Award for emerging designers, and fifty thousand dollars for being named runner-up in the 2006 CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund competition. The year Rodarte won the Ecco Domani Award, Sally Singer, *Vogue's* fashion-features director, served as one of six judges. At Anna Wintour's suggestion, the Gap hired the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund winner, Doo-Ri Chung, and the runners-up Thakoon Panichgul and the Mulleavy sisters, to design a version of the classic white shirt.

In June, Rodarte won the Council of Fashion Designers of America award (a.k.a. "the C.F.D.A.") for Womenswear Designer of the Year, the most prestigious accolade in the fashion industry. A C.F.D.A. win raises a designer's profile, increasing the number of stores that carry the line and, possibly, the number of people who buy it. (Approximately forty-two stores currently sell Rodarte.) Winners are sometimes installed as creative directors of a fashion house, as Nicolas Ghesquiere was at Balenciaga, or Marc Jacobs at Louis Vuitton, or Stefano Pilati at Yves Saint Laurent. "The Mulleavys are ripe for a house who might be looking for a designer," Wintour told me. "A place like Schiaparelli, which is just sitting there waiting for the economy to be better—I think they'd be perfect for that."

Some would argue that there is a downside to being the pets of *Vogue*. For the April, 2008, issue, the sisters submitted to a four-month weight-loss program at the urging of the editors. The magazine provided a trainer and a meal-delivery service at no cost. Kate and Laura detailed the experience in journals, the contents of which were published. "I hadn't realized, though, how many vegetables I never ate," Laura wrote, "and it is rather shocking how much cauliflower we get. I will E-mail them I prefer broccoli." A media furor ensued; the cool kids were picking on the overweight nerds. An article in *Radar* noted, "Like the passive-aggressive frenemy she is, you see, *Vogue* was just *worried* about the husky pair."

"The point of it was that, when you're basically a workaholic, how do you take care of yourself?" Kate said, as we sat in the sisters' studio one recent midweek evening. On the kitchen counter were discarded Starbucks cups and a plastic carton of store-bought mini-cheesecakes, several of which had been eaten. Though the sisters lost fifty pounds combined, they have gained much of it back. I asked if they had continued with any part of the regimen. "I never ate breakfast in my entire life, and I know it was really messing with my mind," Laura offered, looking up from her neat rows of minuscule doodles ("They're hearts, but I'm making them look like flies"). Kate added, "Like, now I would try to eat a banana in the morning."

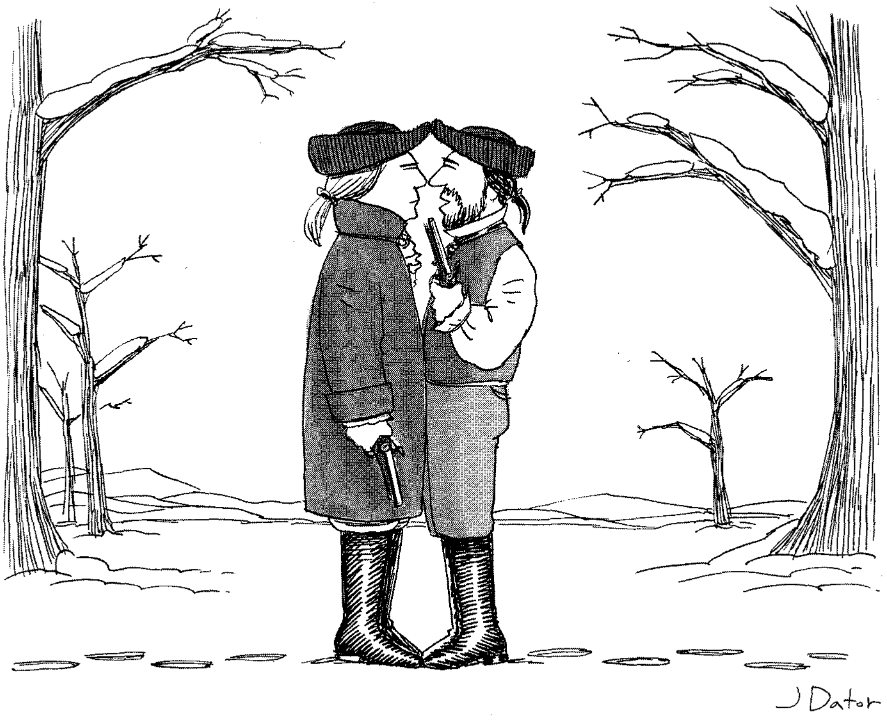
The Mulleavys do not see why their bodies are relevant. "It's assumed, I think, that if you're a woman designer you must be designing clothes for yourself," Kate said with a sigh. There are a number of women designers who have been the best ambassadors for their designs: Coco Chanel, Vivienne Westwood, and Miuccia Prada among them. Most days, though, Kate wears a gray T-shirt, Laura a gray sweatshirt. Their lack of personal style—what Cameron Silver calls "their goober factor"—is a source of curiosity for the fashion people around them: Is their aesthetic cultivated or in earnest?

The sisters can come off as childlike and naïve, but their actions indicate a sharp sense of how the fashion business works. In addition to having befriended powerful editors, they have sent dresses to edgy, artistic women like Cecelia Dean and Kim Gordon, and have allowed only the right sort of actress to wear their clothes—Keira Knightley, Natalie Portman, Kirsten Dunst—while refusing those who might tarnish the label's highbrow finish. "Everyone wants to wear Rodarte, but they don't want everyone to wear Rodarte," Silver said. "We know who we would like to see representing a collection," Laura said, rather cryptically, "and that world has to be very solid. So we're careful."

"They're very smart, very savvy girls—don't be put off by that naïve façade that they have," Wintour told me. "They're savvy enough that they contacted me in the beginning," Silver said. "They may project a quality that's a mysterious naïveté—not that it's a shtick for them. . . ." he trailed off. "But, at the end of the day, they really know what they're doing."

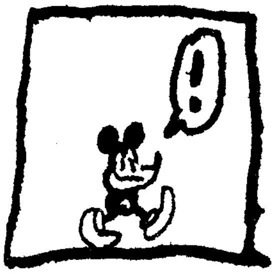
In August, when it was announced in the press that the Mulleavy sisters would be designing a fifty-five-piece collection for Target, no item of which would cost more than $79.99, fashionable young women began anticipating the arrival of the designers' downmarket offerings with the avidity of fishermen awaiting a salmon run. "Start arranging your carpool now," one blogger wrote.

The collection, which does not much resemble Rodarte aesthetically or materially, arrived in stores and online late last month. (In both venues, the merchandise was almost entirely gone in a matter of hours; shortly thereafter, it began to appear on eBay, where it fetched several times the original price.) On a practical level, the items are what Kate and Laura felt "every girl should have." There's a striped sailor shirt, a



"Hang on, I think I know what we're doing wrong."

denim jacket, a little black dress. On a more abstract plane, the inspiration for the collection was three of the sisters' favorite films and "the women who star in them"—Mia Farrow in "Rosemary's Baby," Faye Dunaway in "Bonnie and Clyde," and Ruth Gordon in "Harold and Maude." Nothing was to seem indigenous to a time period. "We did not want it to look vintage," Laura said. But although the collection contains several covetable pieces, too much of it—the slip dresses that recall thrift-store lingerie, the cheap mesh that channels Annie Potts's prom dress in "Pretty in Pink"—looks like resale fare reimagined: Goodwill for people who might not want to brave the wilds of Goodwill's racks. The proliferation of bows seems a stand-in for Rodarte's exquisite detailing, but without the usual mystery of these details. And, of course, the clothes do not offer the intrinsic thrill of classic Rodarte: owning a piece of wearable art.



"The cost of a garment wholesale for Target is less money than half a yard of any textile we use in our clothes—it's such a different price point, for sure," Laura told me recently. Kate added, "We definitely didn't look at this as a way to reinterpret what we do on the runway," and said that they were excited to contribute to "street fashion," which they experienced while growing up near Santa Cruz, with its skaters, surfers, punks, and Hare Krishnas, each subculture evinced by its clothes. "Rodarte becomes part of a larger world, which had so much influence on us to begin with," Kate said. Later, I asked Trish Adams, the vice-president of merchandising for Target, whether the store's customers would need to be educated about Rodarte. "At a thousand dollars, maybe someone doesn't understand Rodarte, but at eighty dollars maybe they will understand it," she told me. "They can just wear it to a party without having it be this major investment." In other words, at eighty dollars a buyer doesn't have to understand Rodarte; she can afford not to.

At Rodarte's spring, 2010, show, in mid-September, Tavi Gevinson, a thirteen-year-old fashion blogger from the Chicago suburbs, modelled prototypes from the Target collection, including a rayon camisole and a lace cardigan, both the color of support hose, and a navy-blue tulle skirt. The real models, their hair overlaid with matted black wool, their lips lined in black, their arms and necks painted with black tribal tattoos (on which forty makeup artists labored for four hours), were dressed in designs that, like their makeup, gestured heavy-handedly toward primitivism. The story, which the Mulleavys had finally arrived at shortly before the show, was about "this girl who kind of became part of a ravaged landscape, and then, for some reason, she burns alive and is reborn as a California condor."

All the clothing had been burned, stained, shredded, sandpapered, or in some way "ruined." The sisters had worked with an "ager" from the film industry. "For the purple-y fabric, after we had finished custom-designing the print with the mill in Italy, and we'd received the fabric, we had to sandpaper the entire thing," Kate later told me. "Then we had to stain it, and burn it, and treat the edges with a razor blade. And that was just one textile." Each dress, according to Laura, contained "at least nine different fabrics"—silk and linen and leather, as well as velvet, cheesecloth, crystal-encrusted cotton, sequinned lace, and a few that Kate and Laura had invented, like "wool cobweb" and "bird skin" (a kind of corrugated fake leather).

In an effort to conjure a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, fans had been rigged to disseminate a thick yellow vapor, which viewers had to wave away in order to see the clothes, and the runway had been sprinkled with a dark sand-like substance. (The grit underfoot, along with spindly six-inch black leather high heels, again created with Nicholas Kirkwood, proved to be a dangerous combination—all the models moved lugubriously, as if at a funeral procession, and one wiped out.) The first few dresses, made of gauzy, threadbare cheesecloth and wool in colors not much seen in high fashion since Cobain-era grunge (black-and-white plaid, puce, and a dull, flat tan), were twisted and gathered in an apparently random manner. There were also dresses that consisted of an explosion of fringe—macramé, crochet knit, strands that looked like those fuzzy yarn hair ribbons that Goody used to make—that brought to mind streamers at a car wash, or the beaded curtains of the seventies. But, creative as it all was, it was difficult to imagine any woman suiting up in tatters for a formal event, let alone a business function. Even for an unconventional occasion, the ragged clothes seemed too fragile for the thousands of dollars they would cost.

The sighting of Renaud Dutreil, the chairman of L.V.M.H. North America, seemed to bode *something* for the future of the Mulleavy sisters. (Ever since, the rumor has circulated that L.V.M.H. is looking to acquire or take a stake in the brand, as it did with Donna Karan and Marc Jacobs.) But the critics were lukewarm, with several lamenting the sisters' continued descent into the dreary basement of high-fashion goth. *WWD* wrote, "As remarkable as this collection was, it would be nice to see them come back into the light and bring a few more approachable looks with them." Robin Givhan, of the Washington *Post*, called the collection "indulgent and depressing," and said that "it did not offer women clothes—not in any meaningful way. . . . Everything else was a dazzling display of technique—put to no functional end."

But Ikram, the owner of the Chicago boutique of the same name, says that Rodarte's 2010 spring collection has been extremely well received by her customers, who, she notes, *want* "a beautiful dress made out of cheesecloth, with holes in it artfully arranged." As she told me, "They don't like it, they love it, and they're paying money to have that hole. You'll never have the same placement twice. That's what makes those pieces special—distressing them, giving them life, giving them history."

Kate and Laura were, as usual, unfazed by either praise or criticism. "If we failed," Kate said, two weeks later, when we met for breakfast at the Raymond, their favorite restaurant in Pasadena, "people would have focussed on just one element, like that everything is burnt. Instead, they focussed on the story. The techniques were never meant to overpower the final result. In the end, when you looked, you just understood the world." ♦

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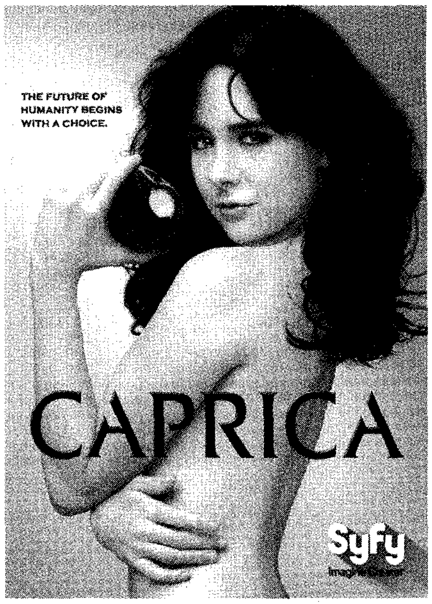
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A REPORTER AT LARGE

A RISKY PROPOSAL

Is it too soon to petition the Supreme Court on gay marriage?

BY MARGARET TALBOT

On January 11th, a remarkable legal case opens in a San Francisco courtroom—on its way, it seems almost certain, to the Supreme Court. Perry v. Schwarzenegger challenges the constitutionality of Proposition 8, the California referendum that, in November, 2008, overturned a state Supreme Court decision allowing same-sex couples to marry. Its lead lawyers are unlikely allies: Theodore B. Olson, the former solicitor general under President George W. Bush, and a prominent conservative; and David Boies, the Democratic trial lawyer who was his opposing counsel in Bush v. Gore. The two are mounting an ambitious case that pointedly circumvents the incremental, narrowly crafted legal gambits and the careful state-by-state strategy that leading gay-rights organizations have championed in the fight for marriage equality. The Olson-Boies team hopes for a ruling that will transform the legal and social landscape nationwide, something on the order of Brown v. Board of Education, in 1954, or Loving v. Virginia, the landmark 1967 Supreme Court ruling that invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage.

Olson's interest in this case has puzzled quite a few people. What's in it for him? Is he sincere? Does he really think he can sway the current Court? But when I spoke with Olson, who is sixty-nine, in early December, he sounded confident and impassioned; the case clearly fascinated him both as an intellectual challenge and as a way to make history. "The Loving case was forty-two years ago," he said, perched on the edge of his chair in the law offices of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, in Washington, D.C., where he is a partner. "It's inconceivable to us these days to say that a couple of a different racial background can't get married." Olson wore a brightly striped shirt and a paisley tie, without a jacket; there was something folksy in his speech, which reminded me that he's a Westerner, who grew up and was educated in Northern California. He said, "Separate is not equal. Civil unions and domestic partnerships are not the same as marriage. We're not inventing any new right, or creating a new right, or asking the courts to recognize a new right. The Supreme Court has said over and over and over again that marriage is a fundamental right, and although our opponents say, 'Well, that's always been involving a man and a woman,' when the Supreme Court has talked about it they've said it's an associational right, it's a liberty right, it's a privacy right, and it's an expression of your identity, which is all wrapped up in the Constitution." The Justices of the Supreme Court, Olson said, "are individuals who will consider this seriously, and give it good attention," and he was optimistic that he could persuade them. (The losing side in San Francisco will likely appeal to the Ninth Circuit, and from there the case could proceed to the Supreme Court.) Olson's self-assurance has a sound basis: he has argued fifty-six cases before the high court—he was one of the busiest lawyers before the Supreme Court bench last year—and prevailed in forty-four of them. Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy attended his wedding three years ago, in Napa. Olson said that he wanted the gay-marriage case to be a "teaching opportunity, so people will listen to us talk about the importance of treating people with dignity and respect and equality and affection and love and to stop discriminating against people on the basis of sexual orientation."

If the Perry case succeeds before the Supreme Court, it could mean that gay marriage would be permitted not only in California but in every state. And, if the Court recognized homosexuals as indistinguishable from heterosexuals for the purposes of marriage law, it would be hard, if not impossible, to uphold any other laws that discriminated against people on the basis of sexual orientation. However, a loss for Olson and Boies could be a major setback to the movement for marriage equality. Soon after Olson and Boies filed the case, last May, some leading gay-rights organizations—among them the A.C.L.U., Human Rights Campaign, Lambda Legal, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights—issued a statement condemning such efforts. The odds of success for a suit weren't good, the groups said, because the "Supreme Court typically does not get too far ahead of either public opinion or the law in the majority of states." The legal precedent that these groups were focussed on wasn't Loving v. Virginia but, rather, Bowers v. Hardwick, the 1986 Supreme Court decision that stunned gay-rights advocates by upholding Georgia's anti-

A still from the advertisement "Family Values."

COURTESY ANDREW PUTSCHOEGL

After the Proposition 8 vote, new ads have aimed to make same-sex marriage palatable by emphasizing the conventionality of gay couples.

quated law against sodomy. It was seventeen years before the Court was willing to revisit the issue, in Lawrence v. Texas, though by then only thirteen states still had anti-sodomy statutes; this time, the Court overturned the laws, with a 6-3 vote and an acerbic dissent from Justice Antonin Scalia, who declared that the Court had aligned itself with the "homosexual agenda," adding, "Many Americans do not want persons who openly engage in homosexual conduct as partners in their business, as scoutmasters for their children, as teachers in their children's schools, or as boarders in their home. They view this as protecting themselves and their families from a lifestyle that they believe to be immoral and destructive."

Seventeen years was a long time to wait. "A loss now may make it harder to go to court later," the activists' statement read. "It will take us a lot longer to get a good Supreme Court decision if the Court has to overrule itself." Besides, the groups argued, "We lost the right to marry in California at the ballot box. That's where we need to win it back." Plenty of gay-marriage supporters agreed that it was smarter to wait until the movement had been successful in more states—and, possibly, the composition of the Supreme Court had shifted. (During the last year of a second Obama term, Scalia would be eighty-one.)

By August, the inevitability of the Olson-Boies suit had become clear, and several of the groups decided, grudgingly, to support the effort. But, when they petitioned to be intervenors in the suit, Olson and Boies opposed the move. Olson told me that their inclusion would have made the case too fragmented, and he wanted a "unified, controlled, consistent, on-message approach." The presiding judge in the case, Vaughn Walker, sided with Olson and Boies, though he did allow the City of San Francisco to join their suit.

Nobody seems to be saying anymore, as some skeptics did initially, that Olson was deliberately setting up the gay-marriage movement for a fall. But doubts remain. William Eskridge, a professor of constitutional law at Yale University, and a prominent advocate of same-sex marriage, says that he is now "even more pessimistic" about the lawsuit's chances, given that, in recent months, voters in Maine approved a referendum overturning a same-sex-marriage law, and the state senates of New York and New Jersey opted not to allow gay marriages. "A question that so evenly but intensely divides the country is not one that should be decided by the courts nationwide," Eskridge said. "It's the mirror image of the mistake the Bush Administration made by trying to introduce a constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman." He added, "It is just not something that this Supreme Court is going to deliver on at this point." It's a peculiar situation: while gay-rights activists advocate judicial restraint, solicitude for the popular will, and a gradual, state-centric approach, Ted Olson argues, in the urgent language of civil rights, for a sweeping, federal solution on their behalf.

At present, only five states—Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Iowa—permit gay couples to marry. (Five others, including California, have civil-union or domestic-partnership laws, which confer benefits and some official recognition without the title, and freighted significance, of marriage.) Since 1993, when the Supreme Court of Hawaii surprised just about everybody by finding that a state ban on gay marriage was discriminatory, twenty-nine states have passed amendments prohibiting gay marriage. (Most states had seen no need to be explicit on that point before.) And in 1996 Congress passed, and President Bill Clinton signed, the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman. Seen from this angle, an incipient movement has been countered by a formidable backlash.

Yet there is a countervailing story, one that points to an inevitable shift toward acceptance of same-sex marriage. In 1993, few Americans had heard of same-sex marriage. Now some forty per cent of Americans support marriage for gay couples, and more than fifty per cent support civil unions. Many more people condone gay marriage today than condoned interracial marriage at the time of Loving v. Virginia, when only twenty per cent of Americans told Gallup that they approved of it.

Younger Americans endorse gay marriage at strikingly higher rates than older ones. According to a 2009 study underwritten by the Pew Charitable Trusts, fifty-eight per cent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine support gay marriage, compared to twenty-two per cent of Americans sixty-five and older. And the age divide cuts across some ideological lines as well. In a 2008 study, twenty-six per cent of white evangelicals under the age of thirty supported full marriage rights for same-sex couples, while only nine per cent of older evangelicals did.

Patrick Egan, a political scientist at New York University, and Nathaniel Persily, a law professor at Columbia University, who together have studied public opinion on gay rights, believe that in five years a majority of Americans will favor same-sex marriage—the result of generational replacement and what Persily calls "attitude adjustment." When people change their mind on this issue, they tend to change it toward marriage equality. The more striking conversion stories of the past couple of years conform to this pattern: Bill Clinton saying that he was "wrong" in opposing gay marriage; Dick Cheney, whose daughter Mary is a lesbian with a partner and two children, declaring that "people ought to be free to enter into any kind of union they wish"; Jerry Sanders, the Republican mayor of San Diego, explaining tearfully at a press conference that he couldn't look his lesbian daughter and others "in the face and tell them that their relationships . . . were any less meaningful than the marriage I share with my wife."

The generational divide does not produce such results for all social issues. On abortion, for instance, younger Americans tend to be less supportive of unfettered rights. Nor does gay marriage seem to be a life-cycle issue—one that people become more conservative about as they age. People who went to high schools where there were gay-straight alliances, had friends who shared their coming-out stories, and grew up in a culture populated with gay celebrities simply feel more comfortable with the idea of same-sex couples marrying.

In some ways, though, this trend makes the Olson-Boies suit more complicated. Why push the Court far ahead of public opinion if public opinion is moving in that direction anyway? Even a victory for Olson and Boies could cut one of two ways. It could be like Brown v. Board of Education, which accelerated a gradual shift in public opinion. Or it could be like Roe v. Wade, in 1973, which interrupted a move toward abortion rights, and froze public opinion in two polarized camps. Olson is undaunted. "I have spent a fair amount of time reading Dr. King's response to people who said, 'People aren't ready for this,'" he said. "His 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' one of the more moving documents in history, addresses this. If people are suffering and being hurt by discrimination, and their children and their families are . . . then who are we as lawyers to say, 'Wait ten years'?"

The case that became Perry v. Schwarzenegger would probably never have materialized had it not been for a young political strategist in Hollywood named Chad Griffin. On Election Night in November, 2008, Griffin was watching the returns at a San Francisco hotel with Gavin Newsom, the city's mayor, who, in a short-lived experiment in 2004, had presided over same-sex marriages at City Hall; Newsom's wife, Jennifer; Bruce Cohen, a filmmaker who produced "Milk" and "American Beauty" and is a high-profile gay activist in Hollywood; and Kristina Schake, Griffin's business partner and best friend. Like many gay Democrats that night, Griffin was exultant about Barack Obama winning the Presidency but despondent that Proposition 8 had passed. Griffin recalls "going into a forty-eight-hour spiral of depression. All I could think about was the message this sent to the kid I used to be, growing up in Arkansas."

But Griffin is not a guy who stays depressed—or at least merely depressed—for long. A week after the election, he was having lunch at the Polo Lounge, in the Beverly Hills Hotel, with Schake, discussing strategy with the actor and director Rob Reiner, for whom Griffin had formerly run a foundation, and Reiner's wife, Michele. This was no idle exercise: Griffin had played a big role in the "No on 8" campaign, enlisting donations and support from prominent Californians, including the actor Brad Pitt, the real-estate heir and film producer Steve Bing, and the supermarket mogul Ron Burkle, who hosted a fund-raiser at his Los Angeles mansion. Griffin has orchestrated successful statewide ballot initiatives promoting clean energy and early-childhood education, and his clients include Maria Shriver, the First Lady of California. Still, nobody at the Polo Lounge lunch had alighted on what seemed like a winning plan until an acquaintance of Michele Reiner's, Kate Moulene, stopped by the table, and heard what they were talking about. Later, Moulene told the Reiners that they should get in touch with her former brother-in-law, Ted Olson. You'd be surprised, Moulene told them—he's with you on this.

"Antarctica is nice, but the only thing I really miss is the herring."

Griffin related this story when we met in the restaurant at the Chateau Marmont hotel, one of those Hollywood landmarks fetishized by the young. Griffin is a slim thirty-six-year-old, and has close-cropped hair and nerdy-chic glasses. In the ostentatiously dim restaurant, the bright-white tennis shoes that he wore with his jeans and blue blazer were like runway lights guiding me to our table.

Griffin came out in his late twenties, and he is dating, but he does not have a partner. Laws like Proposition 8 repel him primarily because they are a form of licensed hostility. Ask him why "marriage equality"—the term he always uses—is so important, and the first thing he's likely to tell you is how much higher the suicide and homelessness rates are for gay teen-agers than they are for their straight peers. "I'll be fine if I can't marry the person I love," he told me. "I have a good life. I'm lucky. But there are consequences to inequality."

The idea of a federal lawsuit had appealed to him immediately. He felt that it had been a strategic and moral mistake for the marriage-equality movement to count on ballot initiatives. "One's fundamental constitutional rights should never be subject to a majority vote," he said. "That's what the Constitution is for. That's what the courts are for." He hadn't given up on politics: it was important to elect people who supported gay marriage and to vote out politicians who didn't. The movement, he said, had to "create more fear of the consequences" for Democratic and Republican politicians alike. But he was through with ballot initiatives: they were the strategy of the anti-gay lobby, and fighting them "forces us to play on the opposition's turf." Griffin's side had spent some sixty million dollars campaigning against Proposition 8. "What we need is to aggressively execute our *own* strategy," he said. "The only way you win a battle of this size is always playing on the offensive."

Griffin is fond of saying, "I was born in a war room," by which he means that his first job, at the age of nineteen, was working on Bill Clinton's 1992 Presidential campaign. He was raised in Hope, Arkansas, and later in Arkadelphia, by a family of schoolteachers, principals, and counsellors. For a while, an aunt was married to a state representative, and Griffin loved travelling around with him, handing out matchbooks to prospective voters. He had earned less than a year's worth of credits at Ouachita Baptist University when Clinton's campaign took off, and he became a full-time volunteer. "If my governor hadn't been running for President at that moment, I might be a manager at Wal-Mart today," Griffin said. "I was Employee of the Month there once." Instead, he took a job as a staff assistant in the White House press office, under Dee Dee Myers. He was one of the youngest staffers ever to work in the West Wing.

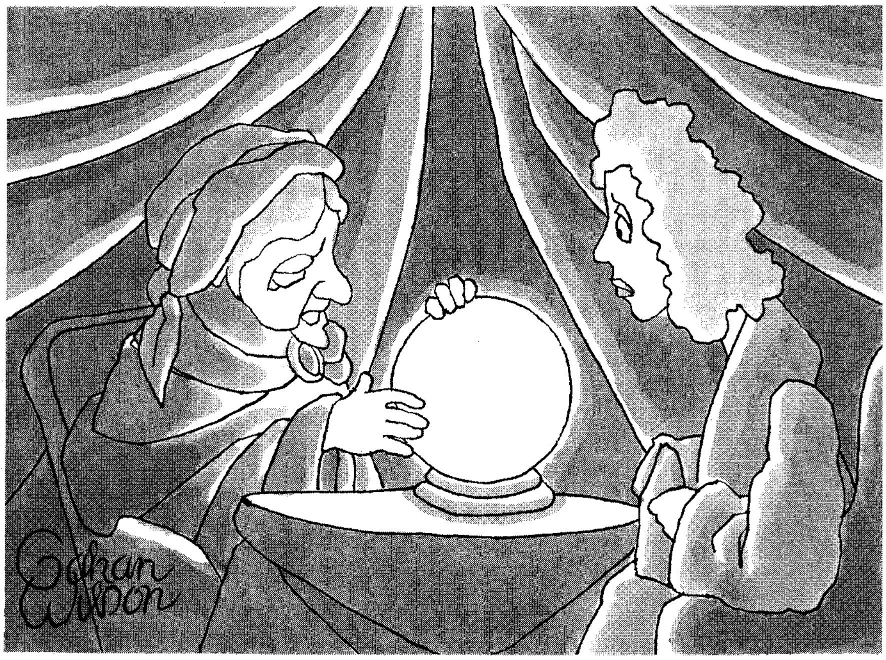
Griffin met Rob Reiner when he was assigned to show him around the White House; Reiner was getting ready to direct "The American President" at the time. After finishing college, at Georgetown, Griffin moved West to work for Reiner, running an organization devoted to health care and preschool for all children under five. But the Clinton "war room" remained Griffin's model of how to make noise in the world. "Every single hour was strategic," he recalled. "I was this little freakin' kid hanging around watching Paul Begala and James Carville and George Stephanopoulos. They did not let the opposition gain an inch, and if it did they knocked it down with firepower." As Griffin saw it, "Our movement has been satisfied with small steps, but we can no longer be afraid of big steps."

He spoke with Olson on the phone, and after that they met in Washington. "At first, I was in a bit of shock that I was talking to this person I'd loved to hate from a distance," Griffin said of Olson. "This, after all, was the man who had given us eight years of Bush." Still, he found a receptive listener in Olson, who had demurred when he was approached about defending Proposition 8 in the California Supreme Court. (Kenneth Starr took the job.) "I wouldn't want to be on that side," Olson told me. He had some history of opposing discrimination against gays—while working in the Reagan Justice Department, he wrote a legal opinion arguing that an openly gay prosecutor could not be denied a promotion on the basis of his sexual orientation—but he had never litigated anything related to the subject. Indeed, several of the cases he'd argued before the Supreme Court would have put him at odds with some of the civil-rights advocates he was now loosely allied with: on behalf of the State of Virginia, he argued against allowing women into the Virginia Military Institute; during the Reagan Administration, he led an assault against affirmative-action "set-aside" programs.

In deciding whether to take the case, Olson talked with his wife, a tax lawyer—and a Democrat—named Lady Booth Olson. (Olson's third wife, the conservative commentator Barbara Olson, was killed on September 11, 2001, in the plane that struck the Pentagon.) He also consulted with his mother, and with his son and daughter, who are both in their forties. The more he considered the idea, the more he thought that "this was the right side to be on"; besides, it would be "an intellectually challenging venture."

Griffin and Olson agreed that federal lawsuits were inevitably going to be filed on this issue, and that gave them a sense of urgency. As Olson told me, "There are millions of people in this country who would like to be married—in California, in Arkansas, wherever. Some couple is going to go to some lawyer and that lawyer is going to bring the case. And that case could be the case that goes to the Supreme Court. So, if there's going to be a case, let it be us. Because we will staff it—we've got fifteen, twenty lawyers working on this case and we have the resources to do it, and we have the experience in the Supreme Court." Olson went on, "We've all seen people bringing cases in the Supreme Court who don't know what they're doing." Proposition 8 was the basis for a shrewd lawsuit, he reasoned, because it had created three unequal classes of people in California: "The eighteen thousand or so gay couples who were already married got to remain married. But if they get divorced they can't get remarried! Is that irrational, or what? Then you have heterosexual couples who can get married, and gays and lesbians who didn't get married before Prop. 8 and now can't."

For the case, Griffin wanted, as he put it, "the lawyers Microsoft is going to want, not the lawyers who are going to do it pro bono." And for that he needed to raise money. He formed a foundation, the American Foundation for Equal Rights, whose logo evokes the American flag, not a rainbow. He and Schake sit on the board, along with the Reiners, Bruce Cohen, and Dustin Lance Black, the screenwriter of "Milk," the 2008 bio-pic about Harvey Milk. In four weeks last spring, Griffin told me, he raised "millions of dollars"—"all from individual donors who have a history of caring about this issue. Less than a dozen. Gay *and* straight."



"You will make the same foolish mistakes you have made before, not only once but many, many times again."

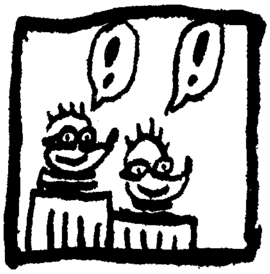
Olson believed, as he recalled, "that it would be very important to balance my reputation as a conservative . . . with someone who had a reputation as being on the other side of the political spectrum." It would send a powerful message of bipartisanship, Olson felt, and "allay people's suspicions of 'What in the world is Ted Olson doing?'" During a conference call with Griffin, Reiner, and others, Olson suggested David Boies. Though Boies had lost to Olson in Bush v. Gore, his track record as a litigator is formidable—he is known as a fierce cross-examiner. In the last few years, he has successfully defended Nascar against antitrust charges, won for American Express a record four-billion-dollar settlement from other credit-card companies, and represented the filmmaker Michael Moore when the Treasury Department opened an investigation of a trip that Moore had taken to Cuba. Olson had become friends with Boies, and thought he was "fun to work with." Griffin and the others were enthusiastic about Boies, and Olson recalls that when he approached him "there wasn't a moment's hesitation."

Boies told me that the issue had been on his mind ever since 2004, when San Francisco had its brief experiment with gay marriage: "I remember being struck by all those powerful images of people from all over the country flying to San Francisco and lining up to get marriage licenses. If it was something that was really so important to people, it was really something that needed to be addressed."

Meanwhile, Griffin had begun discreetly looking around for potential plaintiffs—same-sex couples who wanted to get married in California but hadn't done so in the six-month window between the state Supreme Court decision and the passing of Proposition 8. The plaintiffs needed to be willing to be the public faces for a court case that could take years to resolve, and that many gay activists considered unwise. It isn't easy to find the right plaintiffs for a high-profile constitutional case. There have been plaintiffs before the Supreme Court who made moving and stalwart examples of the principle they were upholding, and plaintiffs who faltered on the job. Mildred and Richard Loving, the interracial couple, were close to ideal. They were blessed with a name so perfectly suited to their case that, had they been fictional characters, you would never have believed it. And they were not professional activists. He was a white bricklayer and she was a homemaker of African-American and Native American descent, and all they wanted was to be married and to live in Virginia, near their families. "Tell the Court I love my wife," Richard Loving said to one of his lawyers. "It is just unfair that I can't live with her in Virginia."

Though it doesn't matter from a legal point of view what happens to plaintiffs after their case is resolved, their post-Supreme Court life can affect how people view their cause. The Lovings, who had three children, remained married until Richard Loving died, in a car accident, in 1975. They seldom gave interviews, though on the fortieth anniversary of the decision Mildred Loving issued a statement: "Not a day goes by that I don't think of Richard and our love, our right to marry, and how much it meant to me to have that freedom to marry the person precious to me, even if others thought he was the 'wrong kind of person' for me to marry. I believe all Americans, no matter their race, no matter their sex, no matter their sexual orientation, should have that same freedom to marry."

Norma McCorvey, who later revealed herself as the Jane Roe in Roe v. Wade, was a more problematic plaintiff. A former carnival worker who'd had an unusually rough life, McCorvey was twenty-one and pregnant with her third unplanned child when she became a plaintiff for Roe. She never had the abortion she'd been seeking—her case was decided too late—and she gave the baby up for adoption. In the nineties, she renounced her role in Roe, saying she'd been led astray by her crusading young lawyers, and began to work for the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue. In 2003, she even petitioned a federal district court to overturn Roe. McCorvey was the sort of plaintiff who should have been better vetted, and whose unhappy trajectory became a metaphor for ambivalence about abortion itself.



In a case about marriage rights, lawyers want to find couples who are likely to stay together—not always an easy prediction to make, especially given the stresses of the case. As Mary Bonauto, the lawyer who brought the 2003 suit that legalized same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, told me, "You want people who can withstand the rigors of a multiyear process." You don't need "picture-perfect people," Bonauto said, but you do need the "kind of people you wouldn't mind sitting in a room and chatting with, no matter who you are. We are always concerned about people who are overeager to be plaintiffs, and people who are huge activists." Ideally, you want people who are just "living their lives" but are running up against a clearly defined problem because of a misguided law. You don't want glib types who are too fluent in movement jargon, but you do want people who can talk easily in a courtroom or to reporters, without stumbling into reality-TV-style oversharing about their romantic life.

One doesn't advertise for plaintiffs in a case like this. Instead, Griffin got in touch with people he knew, or knew of. As he put it, "I'm gay. I live in California. I know a *lot* of gay couples." One day, he was speaking on the phone with Kris Perry, a woman he and Reiner had known for years, because she was active in children's-policy debates and was now the executive director of First 5, a state agency that promotes health and education for young kids. Perry and her partner, Sandy Stier, a tech-support manager who works for Alameda County, live in Berkeley, and are raising four boys, ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-one. Griffin asked Perry if she might be interested in working on a big project to restore marriage equality. As Perry recently recalled to me, she wasn't sure until he explained that it was a federal lawsuit. "Oh," she recalls thinking. "You mean there might be a permanent solution? We get to talk about this in a nonpolitical way? Now I'm really interested." As Perry sees it, "A lot of people out there have gay-marriage fatigue. Sandy and I even have gay-marriage fatigue! With every political defeat, there is a certain level of humiliation." Perry and Stier arranged to come home early from work one day to discuss the prospect with each other, and with each of their children. One of the boys asked if their case was kind of like Brown v. Board of Education, which he was studying in school. Yes, they told him. Perry and Stier figured that they were in a better position than a lot of other committed couples to do something like this. "We're in stable parts of our careers," Perry said. "Our children aren't really young, we live in a really liberal place, and we weren't worried about a lot of rejection from neighbors and friends."

Griffin also approached Paul Katami and Jeff Zarrillo, a couple in the San Fernando Valley, whom he knew through mutual friends. Katami, who is a fitness expert and a consultant, and Zarrillo, who works for a chain of movie theatres, are both in their late thirties, have been together for almost nine years, and are good-looking, polished, and articulate. They were the kind of obviously well-suited couple whom friends and family felt comfortable nudging to just get married already, and they were both severely disappointed when Proposition 8 foreclosed the possibility. The idea that marriage equality "could take a generation if we continue to go state by state," as Zarrillo said, frustrated them. When Griffin told them about the lawsuit, they liked the idea of being involved in something that "put a respectable face to the fight," Katami said. "I didn't want to just come out with my arms swinging."

In San Francisco, Olson and Boies will be arguing that marriage—and, by extension, the right to marry the person you choose—is a fundamental right. The first part isn't so difficult. Marriage is one of the rights—along with, for instance, the right to vote, to travel from state to state, and to bear children—that the Court has repeatedly elaborated on and endorsed, though they are not stipulated in the Constitution. In 1974, for example, the

Court declared that "the freedom of personal choice in matters of marriage and family is one of the liberties protected by the Due Process clause," and in 1987 it affirmed the rights of prison inmates to the emotional support, "spiritual significance," public commitment, and expectation of consummation that come with marriage. Whether these decisions necessarily entail the right to marry a person of the same sex is another matter. Certainly, it could be construed that way, and needn't mean, as opponents of same-sex marriage sometimes claim, that the Court would then have to allow a person to marry a child, or his sister, or his dog. Constitutional rights are not absolute—free speech does not extend to obscenity, for instance—and since marriage is a contractual relationship both parties must be in a legal and mental position to agree to it. And one could argue that legitimate interests allow the state to ban incestuous and polygamous marriages, for example. (Then again, opponents of same-sex marriage argue that legitimate moral interests justify banning gay unions.)

Olson and Boies must also convince the Court that Proposition 8 violates the Constitution's Equal Protection clause by assigning gay or lesbian citizens a different, lesser status with regard to marriage rights. When the Supreme Court decides if a law violates the Equal Protection clause, it engages in one of three levels of scrutiny: "rational basis," intermediate, or strict. If the court uses strict scrutiny, the law in question will be struck down unless it can be shown to have been "narrowly tailored to further a compelling interest" of the state. (It was by subjecting laws against interracial marriage to strict scrutiny that the Court ruled, unanimously, in Loving v. Virginia.) Strict scrutiny is applied only when a law either interferes with a fundamental right or deals with a so-called "suspect" classification: religion, race, ethnicity, or national origin.

If Olson and Boies can convince the Court that the fundamental right of marriage includes the right to marry someone of the same sex, that will get them a long way toward victory. They will also try to convince the Court that sexual orientation is a suspect classification, and that gays and lesbians have been subject to a history of discrimination, are defined by an immutable characteristic that "bears no relation to their ability to perform or contribute to society," and are "politically powerless," in this case, to win marriage equality. This argument is trickier. Though gays and lesbians lost at the polls in California, can they really be said to be politically powerless? Just how immutable homosexuality is remains a hotly contested question. And the Court has never before defined sexual orientation as a suspect classification.

Even if the Court declined to apply strict scrutiny, Boies told me, he could still argue that Proposition 8 fails the much more commonly applied "rational basis" scrutiny. Under that test, a law is considered valid as long as it is logically related to a plausible state interest. But, Boies says, "There is overwhelming evidence of damage to gay and lesbian couples who cannot marry—and to their children—and no evidence that permitting gays to marry damages heterosexual couples. The idea that heterosexual couples won't get married because their gay neighbors can is ridiculous. If you're going to deprive citizens of basic rights, even under a rational-basis test, you have to show that it's of benefit to *somebody*." Olson and Boies will aim to show that the motivation for Proposition 8 could only have been animus—a rationale that the Court does not look kindly on. In the 1996 case Romer v. Evans, for instance, it ruled that a Colorado amendment that excluded gays and lesbians from anti-discrimination laws was motivated by anti-gay feeling, and was therefore unconstitutional.

So far, Judge Walker, who was appointed to the federal bench in 1989, by George H. W. Bush, has made it clear that he has an eye toward both the high court and history. He has allowed the trial to be videotaped, and plans to let the proceedings be uploaded to YouTube each evening. (Boies and Olson supported the arrangement; their opposing counsel argued vigorously against it.) Walker could have relied primarily on legal filings to make his decision, but instead has opted to admit oral testimony on everything from the history of marriage to the history of anti-gay discrimination, from the fitness of gays and lesbians as parents to the definition of homosexuality. Boies and Olson are happy with this expansive approach. They are eager to cross-examine witnesses. And to help establish animus they plan to introduce as evidence material from the "Yes on 8" campaign that lawyers for the opposing side consider confidential. Among other documents, they have obtained a fund-raising letter from a pro-8 activist named Bill Tam, which warned that if Proposition 8 lost "other states would fall into Satan's hand," and "every child, when growing up, would fantasize marrying someone of the same sex."

The legal team on the other side will be led by Charles Cooper, a Washington lawyer who succeeded Olson as assistant attorney general under Reagan, and by the Alliance Defense Fund, a sort of Christian-conservative counterpart of the A.C.L.U. (The State of California, in the person of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, declined to defend Proposition 8, leaving it to private lawyers to fill in.) Cooper will argue that California indeed has a rational interest in upholding "procreative marriage." As Cooper told the Judge at a pretrial hearing, in October, the traditional definition of marriage has "prevailed in every civilized society throughout the ages" and "still prevails everywhere in the world, with the exception of five American states, and seven foreign countries." (Since then, Portugal has become the eighth country to legalize gay marriage.) With Proposition 8, Cooper said, California voters merely defended that tradition. A court, therefore, "should not lightly conclude that everyone who held this belief was irrational, ignorant, or bigoted." At the heart of the case "are two competing conceptions of the institution of marriage, and of its central purpose," Cooper declared. "We say that the central and the defining purpose of marriage is to channel naturally procreative sexual activity between men and women into stable, enduring unions for the sake of begetting, nurturing, and raising the next generation. Plaintiffs say that the central and constitutionally mandated purpose of marriage is simply to provide formal government recognition to loving, committed relationships."

Already, this procreative definition of marriage has led to some puzzled questioning by Judge Walker, and some peculiar exchanges, like this one, at the pretrial hearing:

THE COURT: The last marriage that I performed, Mr. Cooper, involved a groom who was ninety-five, and the bride was eighty-three. I did not demand that they prove that they intended to engage in procreative activity. Now, was I missing something?

Mr. Cooper: No, your Honor, you weren't. Of course, you didn't.

The Court: And I might say it was a very happy relationship.

Mr. Cooper: I rejoice to hear that.

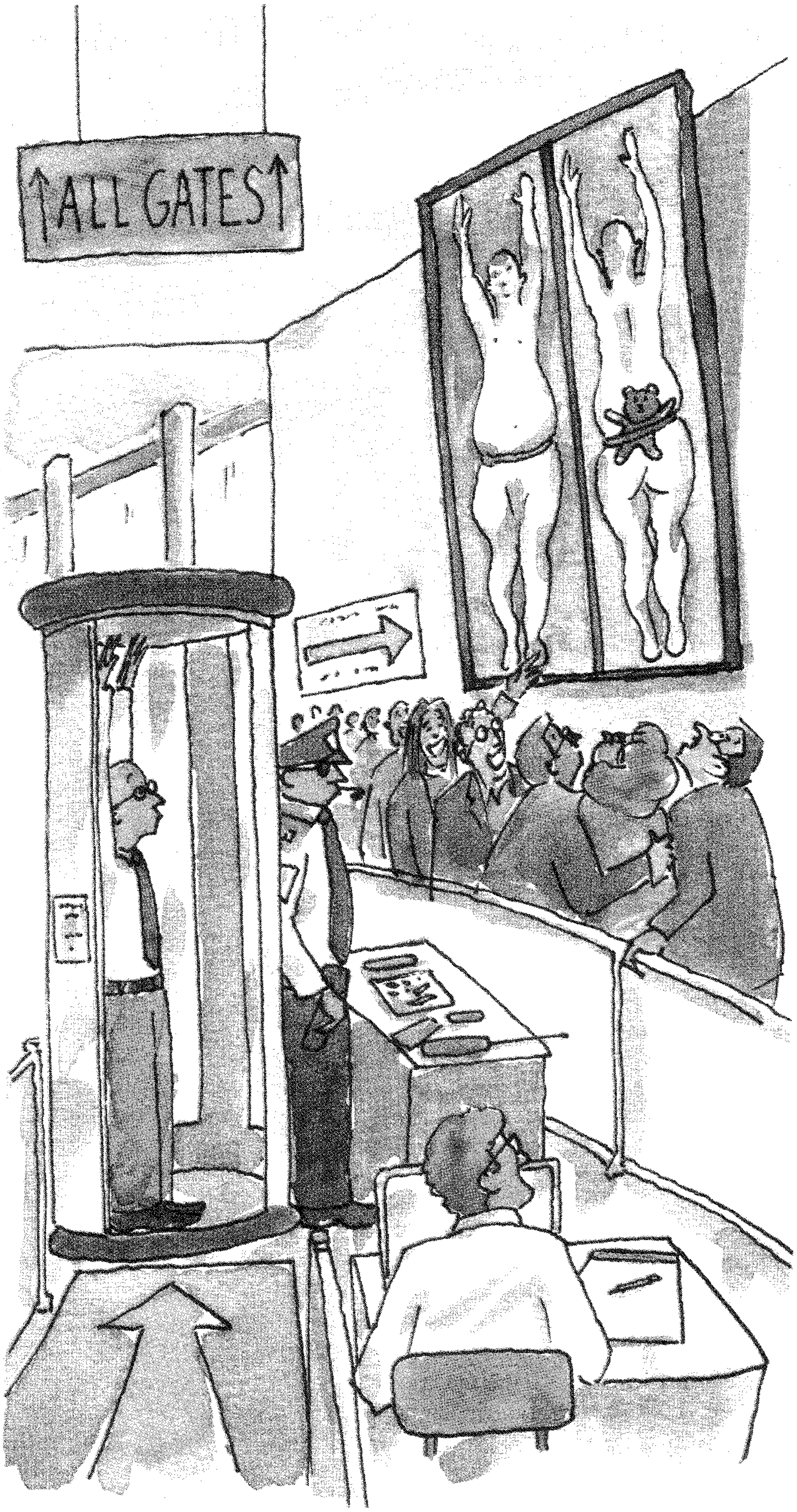
Same-sex couples "do not naturally procreate," Cooper persisted. "That is the natural outcome of sexual activity between opposite-sex couples."

"Fair enough, but procreation doesn't require marriage," replied Judge Walker, who noted that he'd heard on the radio that morning that forty per cent—"can this be right?"—of pregnancies occur in unwed females. Yes, Cooper allowed, that was a sad statistic, but the state still discouraged sexual activity among people who are not married, as it should, because it had a "vital interest" in "promoting responsible procreation." The "body politic ultimately has to take responsibility or shoulder some of the burden"—often through public assistance—of raising children when their parents didn't "take that responsibility properly." (He did not address whether gays and lesbians were any more likely to shirk their responsibility, perhaps because many gay and lesbian parents go to great lengths to have children in the first place.)

The case has involved some unexpected staking out of positions—as though both sides had been reading up on the work of postmodern academics and come to opposite conclusions. Olson's team will argue that marriage is a malleable institution, shaped by shifting notions of gender, race, and property, while sexual orientation is innate. And the defendants will likely argue that marriage is immutable, and sexual orientation is a performative act, a chosen identity.

Nan Hunter, a law professor at Georgetown University, is skeptical about Olson and Boies's chances. "As a purely formal matter, one could argue that Olson and Boies are correct," Hunter said. "But invalidating roughly forty state laws that define marriage as between a man and a woman is an awfully heavy lift for the Supreme Court, and especially for Justices who take a limited role of the scope for the judiciary." She added, "I fear that their strategy is: Ted Olson will speak, Anthony

SKETCHBOOK BY MICHAEL CRAWFORD



Kennedy will listen, and the earth will move. I hope I'm wrong about this—they're excellent lawyers—but I fear, frankly, that there's more ego than analysis in that."

Proposition 8 won by only four percentage points, and some believe that if the opposing side had waged a better campaign California might still have gay marriage. Three statewide organizations—Restore Equality 2010, the Courage Campaign, and Equality California—are now leading efforts to bring Proposition 8 back onto the ballot and repeal it. (The latter two groups are aiming for 2012, because their leadership thinks that 2010 is premature, and that more young people will vote in a Presidential-election year.) Whatever happens with the Perry lawsuit, these groups are waging a campaign to persuade reluctant Californians to embrace gay marriage, and they are basing their approach on the power of personal stories.

After Proposition 8 passed, many gays and lesbians complained that the ads that political consultants had come up with for their side did not show any couples. They did not counter the other side's claim that gay marriage would now be taught in schools with their own images of gay families who would be hurt by the denial of marriage rights. The ads were not visceral or urgent. They didn't show enough love. Instead, they were abstract and a little arid, if sometimes wry. One, based on the "Mac vs. P.C." ads, featured a portly, middle-aged guy in a brown suit, who represented "Yes on 8"; a young hipster in skinny jeans was "No on 8." Another showed a woman talking to her friend about attending her lesbian niece's wedding, but never showed the wedding pictures (or the niece).

Eugene Hedlund, a media consultant in Southern California who runs a political-action committee called TruthAndHope.org, and who is working on new ads for the gay-marriage side, says of the last media campaign, "It was too intellectual. And though that might have worked for some people, it wasn't a strong enough argument against 'They want our children.' I remember thinking, Where are the ads with the couples?... How can you have a campaign based on equality and then hide what it would look like? Can you send a clearer message that there is something to hide? This time around, we'd better be serious about getting emotional."

Many gay-rights activists seem determined to be more emotional and direct this time. Recent polling suggests that people who know someone who is gay are more likely to support same-sex marriage, and one of the goals of the new campaign is to simulate the experience of knowing someone who is gay. Equality California has produced new ads, one of which ran during the Miss California U.S.A. pageant, in late November, showing gay families talking about the homely details of their lives. In one, a teen-age girl and her two moms sit in a sunlit back yard, laughing about the daughter's quest for the perfect prom dress. At one point, the girl recalls telling her moms, "If you can't get legally married, I don't want to be married." She adds, "It's just not fair. It's love either way."

TruthAndHope is working on a series of ads that will be similar to "Local Voices for Obama," which it produced during the Presidential campaign. Those ads, which aired in "red" areas of swing states, were microtargeted, featuring local people—an auto-repair shop owner in Joplin, Missouri; a marine veteran in Columbus, Ohio—explaining why they were supporting Obama. The ads had high production values, but they were unscripted and had a warm, conversational feel. The "Local Voices" campaign won a Pollie—the Oscar of political advertising.

Hedlund now plans to make ads in support of gay marriage that are similarly microtargeted: one might be aimed at Latinos in San Diego, and another at churchgoing African-Americans in South L.A. One ad that he's put together, titled "Family Values," features a man named Frank Reifsnyder, who is a retired naval submarine commander and a devout Catholic. The ad begins with him speaking of his and his wife's long-held dream of grandchildren, and of their happiness when twins came along. "Watching our son become a wonderful father has been an amazing gift," he says. Reifsnyder then explains

ILLITERATE PROGENITOR

My father lived so far from the page
the only mail he got was marked Occupant.
The century had cored him with its war, and he paid
bills in person, believed in flesh and the family plan.

In that house of bookish females, his glasses slid on
for fishing lures and carburetor work,
the obits, my report cards, the scores.
He was otherwise undiluted by the written word.

At a card table, his tales could entrance a ring of guys
till each Timex paused against each pulse,
and they'd stare like schoolboys even as he wiped
from the center the green bills anted up.

Come home. I'm lonely, he wrote in undulating script. I'd left
to scale each distant library's marble steps like Everest
till I was deaf to the wordlessness
he was mired in, which drink made permanent.

He took his smoke unfiltered, milk unskimmed.
He liked his steaks marbled, fatback on mustard greens,
onions eaten like apples, split turnips dipped
into rock salt, hot-pepper vinegar on black beans.

—*Mary Karr*

that his son is gay and has a husband, and that the two of them are raising their children with “strong morals, compassion, and love.” The ad, which has the intimacy of a home movie, shows the babies being baptized; their two fathers walking down a tree-lined street, with the kids on their shoulders; and the whole family, including the grandparents, saying grace before dinner. The montage ends with Reifsnyder saying, “It may not be the family we had imagined, but it is the family we have—and love.” For Hedlund, that’s a seductive sentiment, because “nobody gets quite the family they imagine.”

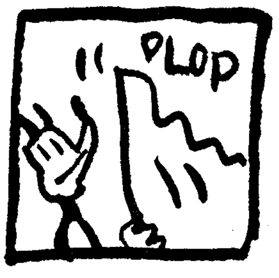
This fall, the spot was tested by H.C.D., a New Jersey-based advertising-research firm, and Republicans were surprisingly receptive: fifty-five per cent of them called the ad “effective,” even though only twenty-nine per cent of them supported gay marriage. Glenn Kessler, the head of research for H.C.D., told me, “That suggests a useful dissonance.” The ad didn’t change many minds after one viewing, he noted, but the reaction “suggests that if you tell that kind of story over and over you could get some movement.” Hedlund said, “TV allows us to have a silent conversation with people who may be having a conversation within themselves already. Maybe they have family in the room that they can’t even share their doubts with. And what we’re doing is giving them permission to have those doubts.”

In door-to-door canvassing, same-sex-marriage advocates are having those conversations out loud. Marc Solomon, who directs the marriage initiative for Equality California, told me, “It’s important for more people to see that we’re not some abstraction. We’re not necessarily the gays in West Hollywood or the Castro but the gays around the corner in Bakersfield or Fresno—maybe the couple you’ve seen walking their dog or watering their lawn. People change their minds on this issue with personal conversation, especially with people who are local.”

Since June, Equality California has been sending canvassers to communities that voted for Proposition 8, and reports that it is persuading nearly a quarter of the people its volunteers meet. The weekend before Thanksgiving, I went out with a team of canvassers in Orange County, an area that, with its history as a headquarters for the aerospace industry and as a destination for whites fleeing Los Angeles, tends to be conservative. Fifteen people, most of them in their twenties, met at a park in Huntington Beach. Younger gays and lesbians tend to be the most motivated on the marriage issue. As Patrick Egan, the N.Y.U. political scientist, says, they are “not as concerned about freedom from discrimination as they are about freedom to be like everyone else.” Egan calls their stance “assimilationist.”

A picnic table was piled with clipboards, bottled water, and doughnut boxes. Two young field organizers, Elizabeth Aversa and Daniel Shad, stood in front of an easel draped with big sheets of paper, each marked to resemble smaller sheets that canvassers had on their clipboards. One big sheet said, in Magic Marker, “Rank ’em: Supportive, Undecided, or Opposed.” Another showed the rankings you were supposed to make after conversing with someone: “Volunteer/donor,” “Supportive,” “Undecided,” “Opposed,” or “Unpersuadable.” Canvassers were instructed to share personal stories—to either come out as gay or talk about someone they cared for who was hurt by Proposition 8. “Tell details, names, years together,” another sheet instructed. “Be emotional and memorable.”

Aversa was an energetic twenty-seven-year-old who had short auburn hair, and who wore gray eyeshadow, jeans, and a hoodie. “The emotional part is really important,” she said. “A year from now, we want people to remember they had this conversation with you, and how sad you were not to be able to marry.” Aversa pointed to a young woman in the group. “Jamie here is engaged to her girlfriend.” The group clapped. “She could talk to people about her hopes for her marriage.” Aversa said to look for “people’s faces softening” as you spoke to them: some would really listen to you, and you’d have a sense of “peeling back layers.”



Aversa and Shad reminded the canvassers to remove their sunglasses when approaching people’s doors—“eye contact is key.” And they told them to ask a lot of questions, because sometimes when people were asked to explain why they believed, for example, that gay marriage would hurt children they discovered that they hadn’t rigorously examined their views. As the crowd dispersed, she called out, “When in doubt, come out! Tell those stories!”

I was assigned to a team with Shad, a low-key guy who wore sandals and baggy shorts. We drove to a neighborhood of neatly kept ranch-style houses, where cactuses and birds-of-paradise grew on freshly mowed lawns. Nearly everybody had set out some sort of harvest-themed decoration, and a lot of the houses displayed American flags.

Only one person was supposed to go to the door at a time—two people on your doorstep talking about their sexuality and the meaning of marriage was thought to be a little overbearing—so I waited on the sidewalk while Shad knocked on the first door. A woman who looked to be in her sixties, with a patchwork apron tied around her waist, and a voice that suggested origins in Brooklyn or Queens, appeared on her porch. When Shad told her why he was there, she said, “I’m very opposed—and I’m very passionate about it.”

“I’m gay,” Shad started in, but the woman cut him off.

“That’s fine that you’re doin’ what you’re doin’, but that’s your choice.”

Shad replied, “It was never a choice for me.”

The woman wiped her hands on her apron, and said, “I have grandchildren, and I’ve told them, ‘None of you are going to be gay, and if any of you are I’m going to do everything I can to ungay you.’ ”

Back on the sidewalk, Shad said, “I’m going to mark her ‘Unpersuadable.’ ”

Next, we knocked on the door of a man named Peter, who also looked to be in his sixties. After Shad mentioned the words “gay” and “marriage,” we heard Peter’s wife hiss, “Don’t talk to those people!” Peter rolled his eyes slightly, stepped out onto the porch, and shut the door behind him. A wiry guy in a blue turtleneck and suède moccasins, he was equable but stubborn. Shad made his overture: “I’m gay, and when Prop. 8 passed, last year, it was a huge slap in the face for me. I felt that my friends and neighbors were saying that my love is not the same as theirs."

Peter was silent, then said, "I don't believe it is."

Shad asked him if he had any gay friends. Peter said that he did. When Shad asked him to name one of them, however, Peter declined—it was none of his business.

If the law changed, Peter said, he'd accept it, but the idea that marriage was between one man and one woman was "a foundation of civilization." We could hear Peter's wife grumbling behind the kitchen window. "They're not leaving," he called to her. Then, to us: "A hundred years from now, people will probably accept it."

Shad smiled: "It's going to be sooner than that."

"Yes," Peter said. "You bring it up again and again and again, and in a few generations you'll probably get it."

Shad tried a different tack: "The marriage you share with your wife, I'm sure a lot of great things have come out of that—"

Peter's wife slammed the kitchen window, and Peter sighed.

At another house, an Asian woman in a Berkeley sweatshirt opened the door a crack. She turned to say something to a small child inside the house and then spoke to Shad as though he were a small child himself. "Of course I voted for Prop. 8!" she said. "Marriage is between a *man* and a *woman*."

"You're married, I assume," Shad said. "Why did you marry?"

The point of asking that question, Shad told me, is to get people to acknowledge that most people don't marry for the benefits, and that domestic partnerships are therefore insufficient. The word "marriage" matters because it seems to exalt love, whereas "domestic partnership" does not. The institution of marriage, shorn of its utility for the inheritance of property and the assurance of legitimate children, now seems more important for the ratification it bestows on our relationships, for its sacralization of love. Shad's provocation did not engage this woman, however: she slammed the door. I almost sympathized with her. Who really wants to answer such a personal question, posed by a stranger on your doorstep?

A few conversations went more smoothly. Shad met a seventy-four-year-old man who was "ambivalent" about same-sex marriage—but he had a gay son, and after they spoke amiably for several minutes the man promised to think more about the subject. The personal connection was the key, Shad told me: "I wouldn't have reached him if he didn't have a gay son."

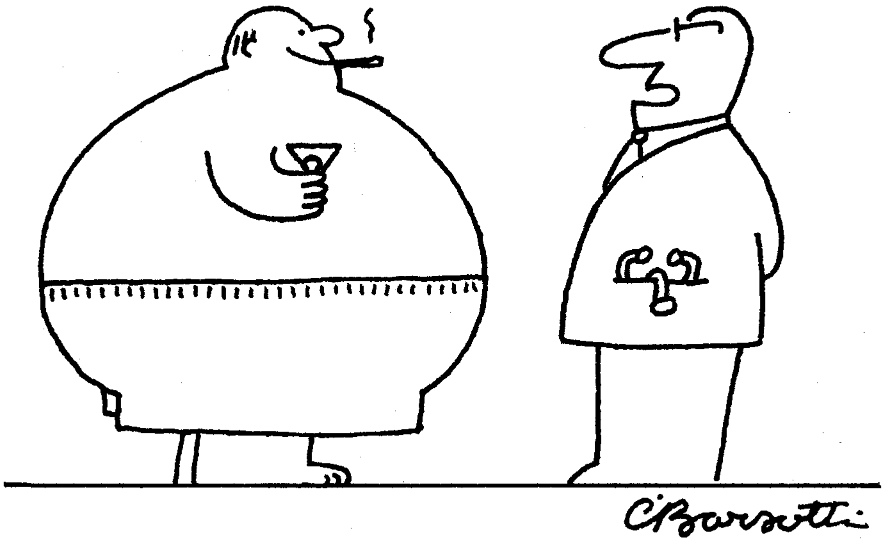
Perry v. Schwarzenegger is not the only federal lawsuit for gay marriage. Another one, Gill v. Office of Personnel Management, is thought by some scholars to stand a better chance of success, though it has been overshadowed by Olson and Boies's effort. Gill was filed last March, by a public-interest law firm, Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), in Boston. One of the GLAD lawyers on the case is Mary Bonauto—the attorney who successfully argued the case that legalized same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. (That case is heralded by many gay activists but is seen by others as a cautionary tale: the ruling, announced in the run-up to the 2004 Presidential election, served as a rallying cry for evangelical voters, and may have helped Bush win a second term.) Gill is not the damn-the-torpedoes case that Perry is. It challenges a section of the Defense Against Marriage Act which prevents same-sex couples from receiving the many benefits accorded to married couples at the federal level—from joint tax filing to health insurance for federal employees' families—even though in the state of Massachusetts those couples are lawfully married. Gill insists not on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage but on the unconstitutionality of denying federal benefits to a class of citizens whose marriages are recognized by the state.

"This is not going to be a case that results in more people getting married if we win," Bonauto told me when I met with her at her offices, across from the Boston Common. A conservative dresser, she has the low, soothingly intelligent voice of a National Public Radio announcer. "But it very clearly presses on the federal government's double standard," she added. "Americans don't like double standards. The federal government recognizes all kinds of marriages once they're licensed by the state except the ones for gay people. We're in the legal mainstream here, when you look at cases like Romer and Lawrence, where the federal courts have condemned gay exceptionalism. And that's what this is." GLAD could have brought the suit that Olson and Boies did but feared "pushing the ball too far and potentially having a setback." She added, "We are wishing the Perry folks the absolute best. That said, we can't help but have concerns about the timing."

As in the Perry case, the plaintiffs in Gill make for an all-American picture. Bonauto's co-counsel, Gary Buseck, told me, "We want people the American public can identify with." From the beginning, Buseck had a vision. "I thought it would be great to have a postal worker," he said. "Everybody knows a postal worker." In fact, the lead plaintiff is Nancy Gill, who has been a postal clerk in Massachusetts for twenty-two years. Among the other plaintiffs are Mary Ritchie, a state police sergeant, whose wife, Kathy Bush, left her job at *The New England Journal of Medicine* to stay at home with their eight- and ten-year-old boys; Bush spends a lot of time volunteering at their school, in a pleasant suburb of Boston. When I visited the family in early December, the living room was Rockwellian: a twinkling Christmas tree, poinsettias on the hearth, and a copy of *Martha Stewart Living* on the coffee table, along with plates of little cookies.

If Ritchie were to be killed in the line of duty, they explained to me, Bush would not be entitled to the federal benefits for spouses of public-safety officers. Bush said, "It's just so odd that one marriage can be treated one way, and another another way."

Two other plaintiffs are Al Koski, a retired Social Security claims representative, and his husband, Jim Fitzgerald, who works at a rehab clinic. They've been together for thirty-four years, but the federal government does not allow Fitzgerald to be the beneficiary of Koski's pension or to be covered by his health-insurance plan. Koski is a hearty guy with a broad Massachusetts accent, who plays bridge with other retired folks on the Cape, where he and Fitzgerald live. When I met them, they told me the story of how they had informed Fitzgerald's Irish-Catholic mother about their participation in the lawsuit. They hadn't revealed to her that they were married, and now they had to tell her they'd be in



"All these years, and you haven't listened to a damn thing I've said, have you?"

• •

the news as a married couple. She's virtually deaf, so they typed up a letter and gave it to her to read. Her response will surely be quoted in the courtroom: "I can't believe you didn't tell me before you'd gone before the justice of the peace. Congratulations!"

As seemingly modest as the Gill case is, it could help create a favorable climate for more ambitious challenges, including the Perry case. Thomas Keck, a political-science professor at Syracuse University who is an expert on the Supreme Court, told me, "I don't think any of us can predict how it's all going to turn out. But Gill is a very well-designed case, a well-targeted challenge that has a good chance of winning, and that broader challenges could be built on. If it wins, in a practical sense we would have federally recognized same-sex marriage. At that point, it would be much harder to defend the federal government's refusal to recognize same-sex marriage in other parts of the country." Gill could also go to the Supreme Court, and if it makes it there first, and succeeds, it could help Olson and Boies. As Gary Buseck told me, "I haven't said this out loud even to myself before, but, to the extent that either of these cases is going to get to the Supreme Court, I think it would be better if our case got there first." (Predicting the trajectory of court cases is, of course, a futile endeavor.) He added, "You have to approach the Supreme Court in an incremental way." For Buseck, this, and not the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," was the relevant lesson from the civil-rights movement. He recalled that the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund had recognized it would be a stretch to try to desegregate the public schools first—it would be too sweeping and provocative an effort. "So they first won cases about a law school and a university, to make it inevitable that when they brought the case that became Brown the chances of winning would be so much better."

Maybe the Perry case stands a better chance than skeptics are willing to admit, given that public opinion is more in favor of gay marriage than it was of interracial marriage when the Court ruled in Loving. But Bonauto notes that in 1967 only sixteen states, most of them in the South, had anti-miscegenation laws, whereas thirty-nine states now have laws against gay marriage. A more aggressive strategist like Chad Griffin would counter that state laws are often anachronistic: South Carolina and Alabama didn't overturn anti-miscegenation laws until 1998 and 2000, respectively. And who would make a serious argument that the Court should have postponed a decision on Loving until the Southern states were in line with it?

To win before the Supreme Court, Olson and Boies need only five votes. Assume that they could count on the four liberal Justices: Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and John Paul Stevens. One might read Justice Kennedy's sympathetic opinions in Romer v. Evans, the discrimination-laws case, and Lawrence v. Texas, the sodomy-law case, as an indication that he would be more open to recognizing gay marriage than his otherwise conservative leanings would suggest. (In his Lawrence opinion, Kennedy argued, "The petitioners are entitled to respect for their private lives. The State cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime.") And though Kennedy's votes with the conservative bloc include one, in 1989, upholding the death penalty for juveniles, he has changed his mind in response to evolving views on a controversial subject: in 2005, Kennedy wrote the opinion that *overturned* the death penalty for juveniles, arguing that a reversal was called for because "standards of decency" had changed.

It may be that evolving "standards of decency" regarding homosexuality have given the Olson and Boies team a key advantage over its opposing counsel. Public opinion has changed enough so that many anti-gay claims can no longer be made in public. "In the early nineties, lawyers defending traditional marriage were willing to make these very broad anti-gay arguments," Thomas Keck said, but that has become more difficult, and sometimes seems to leave advocates of traditional marriage rhetorically disarmed—especially, perhaps, in a courtroom in San Francisco.

For example, one of the arguments that the anti-gay-marriage side has increasingly turned to outside the courtroom is that allowing same-sex marriage would hurt heterosexual marriage. At the pretrial hearing, Judge Walker kept asking Charles Cooper, the lawyer defending Proposition 8, how exactly it did so. "I'm asking you to tell me," he said at last, "how it would harm opposite-sex marriages."

"All right," Cooper said.

"All right," Walker said. "Let's play on the same playing field for once."

There was a pause—it seemed like a long one to people in the courtroom, though it was probably only a few seconds. And Cooper said, "Your Honor, my answer is: I don't know. I don't know." ♦

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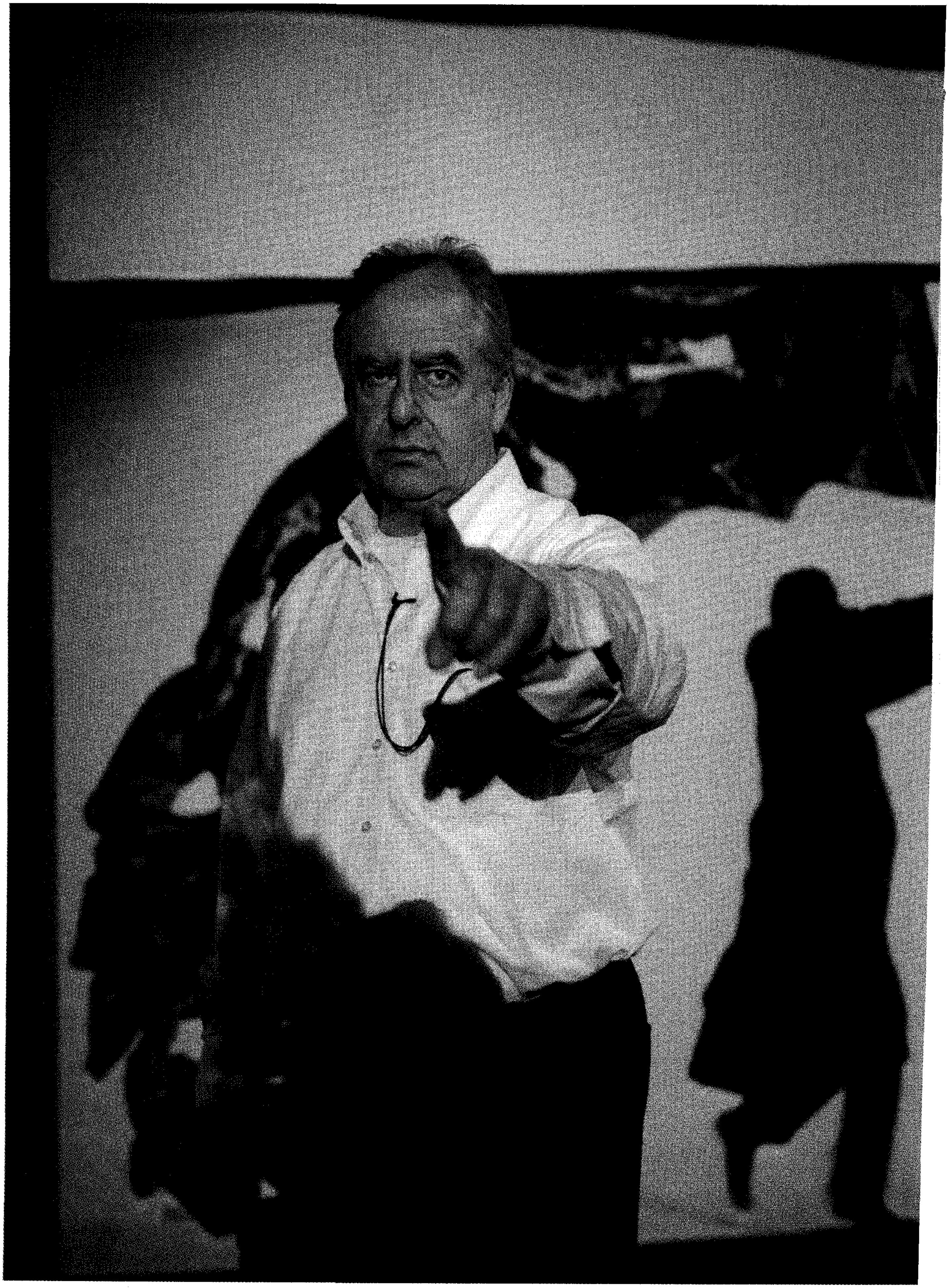
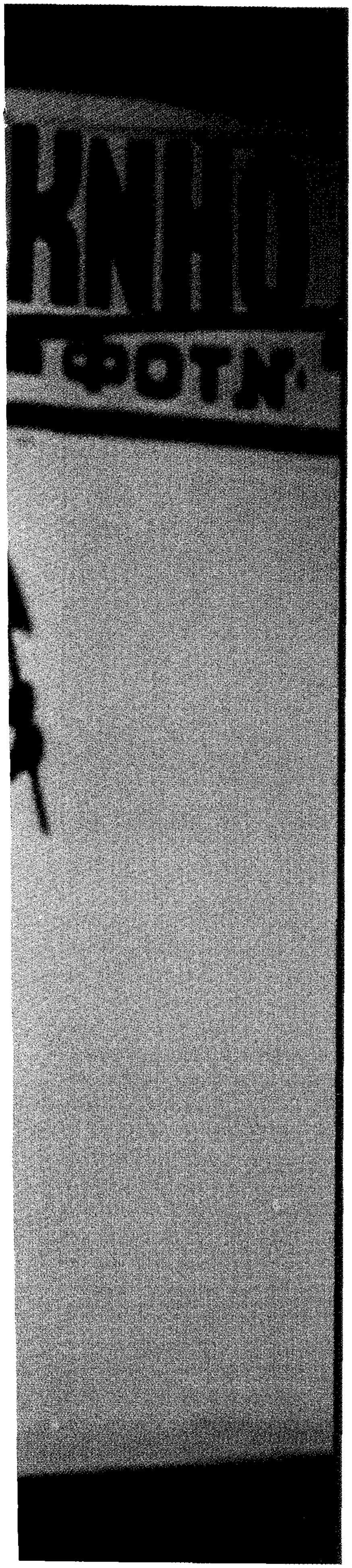
A live chat with Margaret Talbot.



LINES OF RESISTANCE

William Kentridge's rough magic.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS



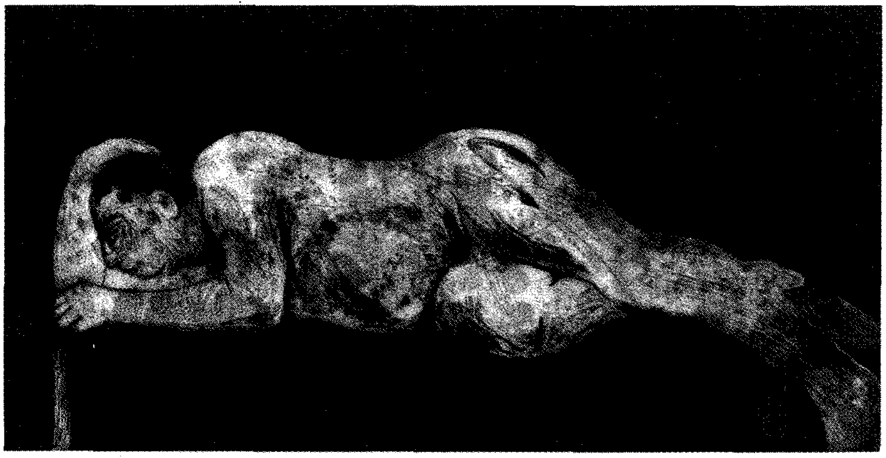
A few minutes before going onstage to deliver his theatrical monologue "I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine," in New York on November 9th, the South African artist William Kentridge admitted that he was feeling "rather stressed." He didn't show it. Kentridge, who is fifty-four, is a solidly built man of medium height, with deep-set blue eyes and the distinctive profile of a Roman proconsul. Dressed as usual in dark trousers and a white open-necked shirt, he seemed thoughtful but confident.

Nearly four hundred people had come to see him, in a cavernous ground-floor space on West Twenty-sixth Street. (The event was sponsored by Performa 09, a three-week series of performance pieces by artists in different venues around the city.) The overflow turnout was an indication of how influential Kentridge's work has become since 1997, when his drawings, prints, and strangely compelling animated films started to register outside his native city of Johannesburg. A major Kentridge exhibition opens on February 24th at the Museum of Modern Art. Organized originally by the independent curator Mark Rosenthal, the show is appearing at eight other museums here and abroad. On March 5th, a Kentridge-directed-and-designed production of "The Nose," the rarely performed opera by Dmitri Shostakovich, will have its première at the Metropolitan Opera. It is hard to remember when a visual artist has cut such a wide swath in the city's cultural life, or spanned so many disciplines with such aplomb. "I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine" (the title is from Russian folklore, and refers to a Russian peasant's denial of guilt) is a by-product of his two-year focus on the Shostakovich opera, which is based on a story by Nikolai Gogol. Although Kentridge often shows up in his drawings and films, this is the first piece in which he has appeared, live, as a solo performer. Promptly at ten past eight, with no introduction, he stepped up on the low platform that served as a stage, surveyed the rapidly quieting audience, and began, in a resonant and cultivated voice, to talk about Gogol's "The Nose."

His summary of the plot was concise and dramatic. Kovalyov, a minor bureaucrat in tsarist Russia, wakes up one morning and realizes that his nose has vanished. During his frantic efforts to find it, he spies his nose on the street, strutting about in the uniform of a government official whose rank is higher than his own. He confronts it timidly, and the nose rebuffs him with contempt. At length, after more humiliating encounters, Kovalyov and his nose are abruptly and inexplicably reunited. The Kafka-like tale, satirizing self-image and the terrors of hierarchy, set Kentridge off on a wide-ranging, forty-minute exploration of the absurdist impulse in literature, art, and history, and in his own life. From time to time, he was joined on the stage by projected video images of himself: first one and then two white-shirted figures who came and went mutely, sat down, stood up, moved furniture, and eventually imitated Kentridge's habit, during his talk, of tossing his lecture notes into the air. Kentridge's precisely timed attempts to intimidate or ignore his split selves, and to catch and retrieve the projected images of notes, drew somewhat uneasy laughs, but the audience stayed with him. Near the end, he put on gold-rimmed pince-nez (which he keeps in his shirt pocket, tethered by a black shoelace) and read excerpts from Nikolai Bukharin's testimony, in 1937, before a plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow. The doomed Bukharin's appeals

Kentridge performing a monologue inspired by Gogol. Photograph by Steve Pyke.

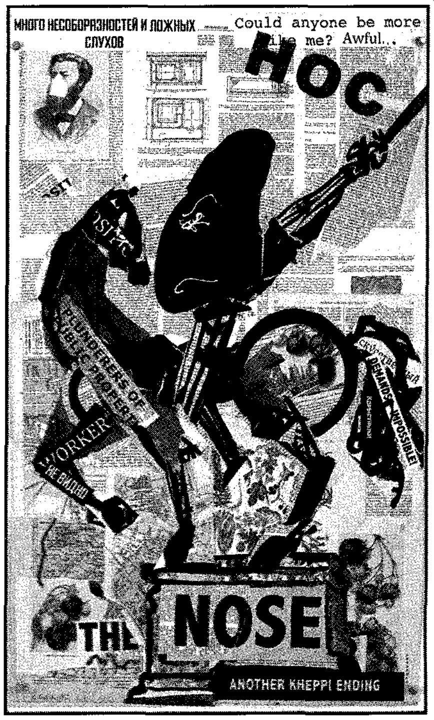
to reason and human decency, and the ironic laughter with which they were received, pushed the absurdist theme into political areas that Kentridge, who grew up with the ambiguities of being white and Jewish in South Africa, has dealt with throughout his work. No artist is less didactic than Kentridge, however, and he offered no explicit connections. He ended his performance in pensive silence, looking away from us as the stage lights went down.



"Sleeper Red" (1997), etching, aquatint, and drypoint from two copper plates.

Like many people, I can remember the first time I saw a Kentridge film. It was in 1999, in a Projects show at the Museum of Modern Art, and the film was called "Stereoscope." An eight-minute sequence of hand-drawn animations, it included a heavyset businessman in a dark chalk-striped suit, sitting at a desk piled with papers; a dozen or more people manning a huge switchboard, from which swiftly moving cobalt-blue lines proliferated and intersected; individual men and women being pushed aside and obscured by pages of meaningless numbers; a dense crowd of people surging through city streets; men kicking or beating helpless victims. The businessman reappeared toward the end, holding his head in apparent anguish; the word "GIVE," in large capitals, filled the screen and changed to "FORGIVE"; the businessman stood, looking down, as blue water poured from the pockets of his clothes, filling the room. The images were crudely but powerfully drawn, in charcoal and blue pastel, and filmed in an old-fashioned stop-motion technique. I had never heard of Kentridge, didn't know he was South African, didn't understand that his images were rooted in the terrible history of apartheid and its aftermath, but the film made me forget where I was.

"Stereoscope" is the eighth of Kentridge's "Nine Drawings for Projection," the series that launched international interest in his work. During several conversations I had with him last fall, when he was in New York, he told me that the first film in the series, titled "Johannesburg, Second Greatest City After Paris," came about more or less by accident, in the late eighties. He was thirty-four years old at the time, married to a doctor, with two young children, and he considered himself a failure at everything he had tried to do—painting, acting, commercial filmmaking. It was a particularly grim time in South Africa. To stem the mounting internal opposition to apartheid, a state-of-emergency law had been passed in 1985, and arrests and police brutality were on the rise. International sanctions and boycotts had isolated the country from Europe and most of the world. Kentridge decided at this point to go back to the one thing he had always been able to do well, which was drawing. The artists he admired most, then and now, tended to be great draftsmen—Goya, Max Beckmann, Picasso—and his new, large-scale charcoal drawings and engravings, many of them quick studies of people he had seen on the street, had that kind of unrefined intensity. A Johannesburg art gallery exhibited them in 1985 and 1986, and although quite a few were sold, Kentridge still felt discouraged. "I had a terrifying moment of thinking, An exhibition every eighteen months, another forty years of work—is that all it's going to be?" he told me. "I needed to find something else." Using a borrowed 16-mm. Bolex movie camera, he began making a film in his studio, with the Warholian idea that anyone or anything that came in would be included. One of his charcoal drawings was on the wall; he filmed its successive changes and erasures. When his close friend Angus Gibson, a filmmaker and film editor, saw the raw footage, Kentridge told me, "he said the only interesting part was the drawing, and why didn't I make a film out of drawings? Angus nursed that first film into being."


МНОГО НЕСООБРАЗНОСТЕЙ И ЛОЖНЫХ СЛУХОВ
Could anyone be more like me? Awful...
НОС
NEW YORKER
THE NOSE
ANOTHER KHEPPI ENDING

Banner design for production of "The Nose."

Kentridge didn't know where he was going with it. "I had two men," he said. "One was Soho Eckstein, a character I'd used in posters for trade unions. That was easy, the businessman in the pin-striped suit—it was made for drawing. I had no idea what the other man would wear, so I decided to make him without clothes. And I put a woman between them, who became Mrs. Eckstein." The naked man is Felix Teitlebaum, a sensitive poet and dreamer, the lover of Eckstein's voluptuous wife. Felix and Mrs. Eckstein appear in three of the nine films, and Soho appears in all of them. "Much later, I realized there were elements of me in both men," Kentridge said. "I look back now and think, How lucky not to know what you're doing."

LEFT: COURTESY KREEGER MUSEUM; RIGHT: COURTESY WILLIAM KENTRIDGE/MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NY

There were no storyboards; nothing was worked out in advance. "It doesn't start with a social message," he explained. "It starts with images that interest me, or provoke me." He found he could make a crowd move across a landscape by placing a tiny dot in one corner and gradually adding more. He called his method "stone-age animation." For a sequence that would take hundreds of computer-drawn cels in a Pixar film, Kentridge used a single charcoal drawing, altered and rephotographed again and again. The shadowy leftover traces of smudged or erased lines made each film a palimpsest, a history of its own making. I still can't figure out why these stubbornly low-tech films are so moving. In "Sobriety, Obesity, and Growing Old," the fourth in the series, Eckstein, whose wife has left him, stands facing away from us into a blasted postindustrial landscape, under a sign reading "Her Absence Filled the World." Kentridge's friend Yvette Christiansë, a South African poet and novelist who teaches at Fordham, told me that when she shows a Kentridge film to her freshman class "they don't breathe until it stops, and then they don't know how to talk about it. This happens every time." I know artists who dismiss his work as retro and maybe a bit kitsch. The *Times* art critic Roberta Smith has described his drawings as generic and impersonal. The European curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, one of his main supporters, once wrote that Kentridge, by denying coherence, clarity, and style, has created "an art of 'resistance' to modernism *and* post-modernism." I agree with her. For me, the "Nine Drawings for Projection" have a rough magic that's unlike anything else in contemporary art.

South Africa has produced many fine writers but very few visual artists of international stature. For Kentridge, becoming an artist was "a completely unnatural thing to do"—the natural thing, he says, would have been to study law. Three of his grandparents and both his parents were lawyers. "My paternal grandfather was a member of Parliament here from 1913 to 1956," he told me, "and I don't know if he practiced law. My grandmother on my mother's side was the first woman barrister in South Africa and the second in the British Empire." Both sides of the family had immigrated to South Africa before the turn of the last century, to escape the wave of pogroms in Russia; in South Africa, as assimilated Jews (the family name had been Kantorowitz), they prospered, first in small trade (tailors, locksmiths) and then in the law, becoming part of a tiny liberal élite in a land where highly conservative whites ruled over an overwhelmingly black majority.

When Kentridge was five, he discovered in his father's desk a folder of eight-by-ten photographs of black people who had been shot by the police in the Sharpeville massacre. "It was certainly a shock to be expecting to find chocolates and see these photographs," he recalls. "But it was even more of a shock to see the difference between an entry wound, just a dark little hole in the back of someone's jacket, and the next photo of the person rolled over, with an exit wound that was the whole chest exploded. I never mentioned to my father that I had seen them, not until years later. That the adult world could be this violent—it didn't fit any conceivable notion. It was one of those moments when one's understanding of the world turns a sharp corner." Sydney Kentridge, his father, was a leading trial lawyer in the anti-apartheid movement, and his wife, Felicia, co-founded the most important public-interest law firm in South Africa. They were brilliant, magnetic people, extravagantly admired by their many friends, and by the liberal intelligentsia whom they welcomed to their house. A family member recalls the novelist Nadine Gordimer's saying that when Felicia walked into a room it took your breath away. When William was growing up, he often considered becoming a lawyer. "I think I'd have been able to do that, and do it well," he told me. "But it always seemed that my father's was an impossible act to follow." His three siblings apparently felt the same way. William's older sister, who lives in Toronto, is a marriage officer. His younger brother is a management consultant, and his younger sister is an artist; they both live in England. Sydney and Felicia Kentridge left South Africa, moving to London in 1981. "My father couldn't bear to appear before the terrible South African judges anymore, and it seemed impossible that things would change," William told me. "I am the only one who's still here."

The family lived in a large, comfortable house, on a hillside about two miles from the city's center, with three acres of rambling English-style gardens. Their black servants lived in separate quarters on the property. Kentridge was a bright, articulate child, with a lively sense of humor. His father recalls an incident when he was five, and his mother, who was taking him out, told him to wash his hands and put on his shoes: "'One or the other,' William said. 'Not both.'" He went to the all-white boys' school that his father had attended. Most of his classmates came from families that supported the conservative United Party, and they saw nothing unusual about their social situation. Because of his parents, though, Kentridge was aware early on that he lived in an abnormal society, where terrible things were done every day.

He did well in school, and he acted in all his class plays. He also did a lot of drawing. He remembers, at one of his first art lessons as a child, being given a piece of charcoal, which seemed "more serious than a pencil." Kentridge had art lessons every Saturday morning until he was fourteen, when he started going to life-drawing classes with an artist named Bill Ainslie, whom his parents had got to know when they asked him to paint a portrait of their younger son and daughter.

At the local University of the Witwatersrand, which he entered in 1973, after a year of compulsory military service, Kentridge majored in politics and African studies. He also directed and acted in theatrical productions, many of which were politically based; student opposition to the apartheid government was rife at the university, and Kentridge did some marching and protesting. At least half his time, though, was spent off campus at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, a non-racial, non-credit art school that Bill Ainslie had started in 1972. Kentridge was trying to be a painter then, and not making much headway. His problem was with color. "I found it really difficult to choose one color as opposed to another," he said. There was no such indecision in his relationship with Anne Stanwix, an Australian whose family had moved to South Africa when she was sixteen. She had come to his high school once, with the debating team of her all-girls' school. Kentridge had been in the audience that night, and afterward he invited her to have tea with him. They met again in freshman year at the university, where she was studying medicine, and they have been together ever since.

For several years after college, Kentridge seemed headed for a career in the theatre. He and some fellow-students had started the Junction Avenue Theatre Company in 1975, while they were still in school; they performed in Johannesburg, doing Alfred Jarry's "Ubu Roi" and other experimental workshop productions, one of which, "The Fantastical History of a Useless Man," was about "what it felt like to be white and useless in South Africa." Kentridge said, "We finished it in 1976, just as the Soweto riots exploded, and we had this big discussion: Do we keep going or do we stop?" The group eventually joined forces with a black theatre company called Workshop '71 and continued performing. Kentridge acted, directed, designed sets, and made posters. (He also designed posters for the black trade unions, which had gained the right to strike in 1979.) He kept taking art classes at Ainslie's foundation, and made drawings and prints on his own. Eventually, though, his problems in handling oil paint convinced him that he could never make it as an artist, so he decided to go to Paris and become a serious actor.

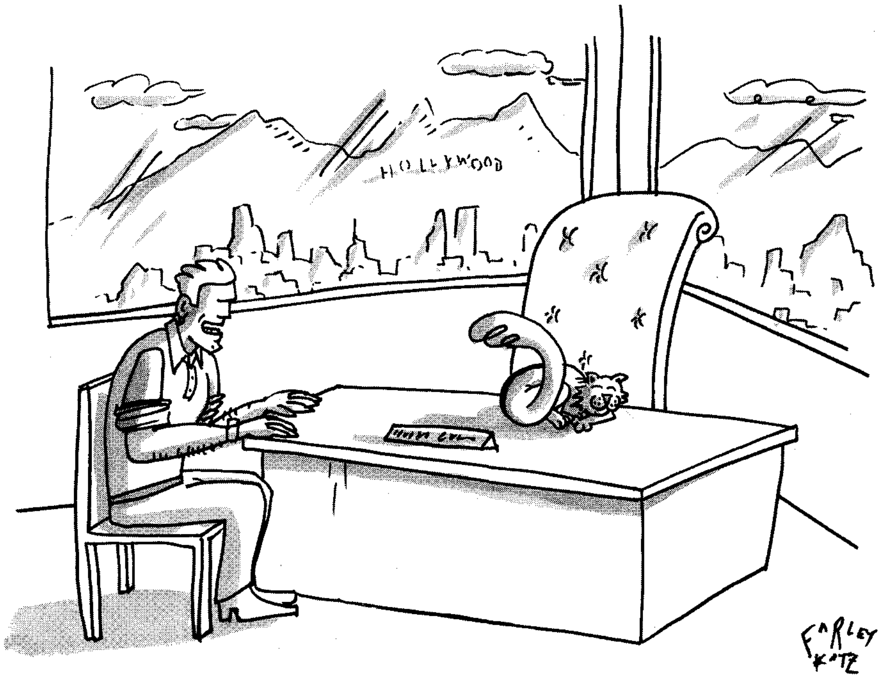
"There was this theatre school I'd heard about in Paris, L'École Jacques Lecoq, whose approach was very different from traditional forms of theatre training," he recalled. "Instead of starting with a text, Lecoq started with movement as the basis. It wasn't mime—there were several schools of mime in Paris, and none of them spoke to the others. A lot of theatre directors have come out of the Lecoq school—Simon McBurney, Ariane Mnouchkine, Luc Bondy, who just did the 'Tosca' that people hated. But within three weeks it became very clear, to me and to others, that I should not be an actor. Every week, we had to do a series of improvisations, and every week mine would look exactly the same."

He and Anne finished out the year in Paris. She was doing her residency at the American Hospital, and he was learning more about art, he said, than he had ever learned in art school. Kentridge described a rigorous exercise in which Lecoq students had to act out six degrees of tension in breathing and speaking—he demonstrated them for me—from a kind of lassitude that made movement of any kind virtually impossible, to the sixth degree, in which the simple act of picking up a fork involves a "rictus of tension that corresponds to Japanese Noh theatre." The exercise, he said, helped to instill a physical awareness of energy withheld and spent, and it could also be applied to drawing: "You go from a looseness of mark-making to an efficient one to a gestural one."

He and Anne decided it would be fun to get married in Paris, but, lacking the required documents, they married in London instead. In 1982, they returned to Johannesburg—"that rather desperate provincial city," as Kentridge once called it. The city and its complex history fascinate him: the mineral wealth (gold and diamonds) that made it an industrial giant and left on its outskirts a wasteland of abandoned mines and industries, which appear again and again in his films; the fact that its two most famous residents in the last century were Gandhi and Nelson Mandela; the discovery, in limestone caves thirty miles from the city, of hominid fossils that push back the date of human origins by a million years or more. "There is something extraordinarily ugly/beautiful about Johannesburg that informs his work," his friend Angus Gibson said last fall. "I can't imagine him living anywhere else." The Kentridges took a house in a low-rent district near the center of town, where, a little later, drug dealers operated openly. "People were constantly coming in to get their wounds mended by Anne," Gibson recalls.

Kentridge worked in the commercial-film industry. He did props and designed sets for television, and went on to make a few documentaries and one short feature. "I had a friend who used to ask me, jokingly, when I was going to get a real job," he recalls. "One day, he said, 'You are now unemployable. You're nearing thirty, you've never had a job, and no one will hire you, so do what you're doing and stop complaining.' Our first child, Alice, was born soon afterward, in 1984, and suddenly there was a big change of focus. I started drawing again. That's the point where I began to write 'artist' on application forms, rather than 'technician.' Sink or swim, I was reduced to being an artist."

The cultural boycott of South Africa, he says, made it easier to find his way. It meant he could work quietly on his own, without trying to keep abreast of current developments elsewhere. His knowledge of contemporary art was limited. "I had never heard of Bruce Nauman," he said. "I was aware of Joseph Beuys—Beuys



"It's such a pleasure to meet you—you look even sleepier in person than you do on YouTube."

and his honey pump, which was supposed to be political art. But politics is not spreading honey around the main building at the Documenta art exhibition. It's putting electrodes on people's testicles, locking them up, putting them in fear of their lives. There was some anger separating me from the naïveté of Jasper Johns, who could celebrate his national flag so un-ironically. In South Africa you could not begin to paint the flag." The minimalists and conceptualists made him marvel at the huge gap between his experience and theirs. "Part of this was a mixture of ignorance and provincial disdain for the center," he said. "At any rate, there was no expectation of my work appearing in *Flash Art* or *Art in America*, so the terror those magazines exercised over a lot of young artists wasn't there. And by the time the cultural boycott ended, in 1990, I was making the animated films. When they were shown in exhibitions outside South Africa, and curators responded to them on their own terms, I was astonished."

Two of Kentridge's films, "Felix in Exile" and "History of the Main Complaint," drew widespread comment at the 1997 Documenta X exhibition, in Kassel, Germany. His timing could not have been better. Globalism was in flower, and one of its manifestations was a surge of interest in new forms of art from countries outside Europe and the United States. "He just came soaring through that," according to Connie Butler, the chief curator of drawings at MOMA, who saw his work the next year at the Drawing Center in New York. "His drawings had an intensely local feeling," she said, "but I remember being struck by the combination of their intimacy and their performative quality—something I had never seen before." Klaus Biesenbach, one of three MOMA curators who will install the Kentridge show at the museum next month, told me that Kentridge's time-and-process-based art, "which bridges opera, theatre, movies, sculpture, and drawing," could not have been shown on this scale at a major museum ten years ago. "It's a huge shift in paradigms," he said.

Apartheid ended in 1994, when the African National Congress Party won the first democratic election, and Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa. For Kentridge, though, the key event had occurred four years earlier: "I was driving on a highway, listening to the boring opening of Parliament in 1990, when the announcement came that all the political parties banned since the nineteen-sixties would be unbanned. I pulled off to the side of the road, because I understood that everything was going to be different. We didn't know what would happen, whether it would turn into civil war, but we realized that the unchangeable blocked situation had just been rolled over. That was the night we opened the champagne."

The transfer of power from the outgoing government to Mandela's party was fraught with tensions and uncertainties. "It seemed wonderful that we had a country transforming itself without the streets running in blood, and that we had a political compromise, but the price of the compromise was deeply felt," Kentridge said. "The main decision was to put the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in place, with the understanding that terrible criminals would be let off scot-free as long as they told the truth about what they had done. There's a cost to pay for that kind of amnesty. The choice was made between truth and justice, and it meant not taking responsibility for your actions."

This dilemma was reflected, though never overtly, in Kentridge's work. In 1992, he had begun to collaborate with the Handspring Puppet Company, a professional troupe that performed mainly in Cape Town and Johannesburg. He made animated film projections, which were used onstage with large, hand-carved wooden puppets, each of them manipulated by two live actors. "Faustus in Africa!," their 1995 adaptation of the Faust story, resonated with undertones of the bitter choices being made in post-apartheid South Africa. Testimony from the Truth and Reconciliation hearings informed "History of the Main Complaint" and figured prominently in "Ubu Tells the Truth," an animated film whose central image is the monstrous tyrant of Jarry's play. Kentridge never tried to illustrate apartheid or its aftermath directly, but much of his work in the nineteen-nineties stemmed from his own struggle to come to terms with a compromised society. As he once explained, "I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures, and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay."

Kentridge's parents returned from London several times a year for visits of varying length. They came back less often as the years passed, and in 1997 William and Anne and their three children—Isabel was born in 1988, Samuel in 1992—moved into his parents' big house in Johannesburg. "We'd thought the only way we could manage it financially was to break up the property and sell off sections," Anne recalls, "but that was the year William showed at Documenta, and the year Marian Goodman asked him to join her gallery in New York. He was also approached by a dealer in London, and suddenly we could afford the rates and taxes and all the gardening costs. His parents had planted two cypress trees—one on either side of the front door—which had grown so high, in forty years, that they blocked the view. When we told William's parents that we were going to cut them down, it felt a bit like matricide and patricide—those two looming figures too large for us to cope with." Anne worked long hours at the main public hospital, where she was a rheumatologist. She also took a keen interest in William's work, commenting on it with candor, and even appearing nude in one of his films. Kentridge turned the sitting room into his studio, where the children were always welcome—he would get them to make shadow puppets or paint posters. He took them to school and brought them home, and he did much of the cooking. (His birthday cakes were very inventive: Alice remembers getting a giraffe one year and a pirate chest full of gold coins another.) Eventually, he built a larger studio, in the garden.

Work poured out of him—films, sculptures, puppet-theatre productions, charcoal drawings, and also prints, which have always been an important part of his œuvre. One of Kentridge's projects with the Handspring Puppet Company had been an adaptation of Monteverdi's opera "The Return of Ulysses," which he designed and directed. Widely performed, it caught the attention of Bernard Foccroulle, then the director of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, in Brussels, who asked Kentridge if he would be interested in staging—designing and directing—a full-dress opera. Kentridge loves opera, a passion he shares with his father, and the prospect of working on a big stage excited him. Finding the right opera took two years. He spent a year and a half working on "Tannhäuser," but Wagner's long, static scenes were inhospitable to the kind of staging, with animated-film projections, that Kentridge had in mind. "Finally, in 2004, I went to the director and said, 'Sorry, I can't do this.' He said, 'Well, we're also thinking about "The Magic Flute,"' and I said yes, immediately."

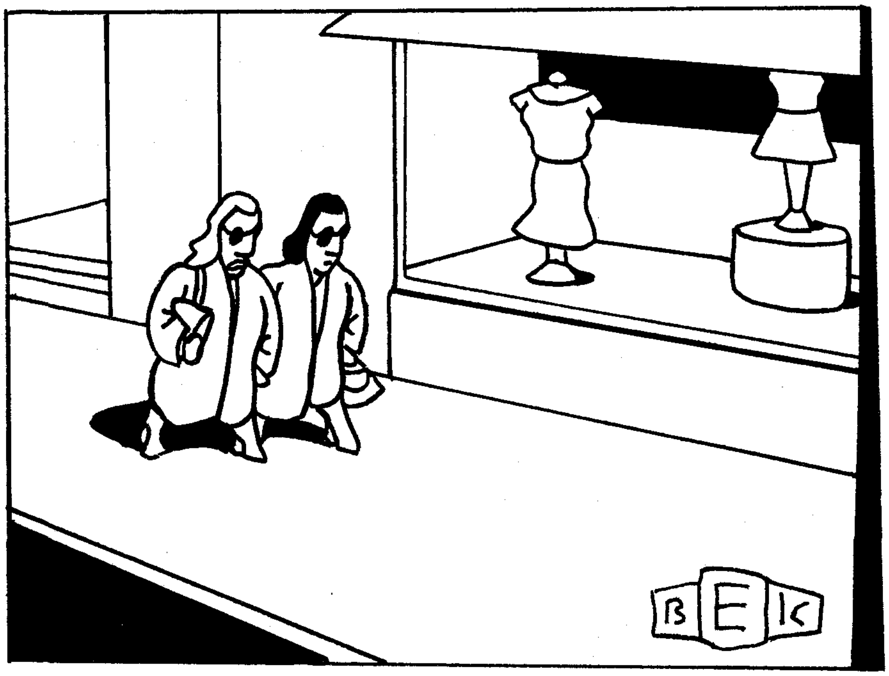
He had seen the opera only once or twice. He adored the music and the libretto's childlike, fairy-tale qualities, but, as he said, "I realized I knew very little about it. I knew that Act I has great scenes, with wild beasts and bird-catching, and in Act II there's an impossible series of scenes with priests, where you don't really know what's going on, and then you have a great duet at the end. One of the main jobs was to make the story flow—not to let the second act be a confusion. It had to work like a fairy story." For Kentridge, the most pressing problem was how to adapt his own process-oriented method of working to a situation that involved dozens of other people and a lot of meticulous planning. One reason he had failed as a filmmaker, he told me, was that it was hard for him to give other people instructions—to do so would imply that he knew what he was doing in advance. The solution he found this time was to spend many months alone in his studio, working out the film elements, and then to have a series of workshops with a four-person team of experienced collaborators, whom he chose and brought to Johannesburg: a set designer, a costume designer, a video editor, and an assistant director to work on the staging. Many drawings and a number of independent works came of this process, including a model theatre, built in his studio, with three-dimensional sets and backdrops. "It was a lot harder when I had to confront the singers on day one of the rehearsals," he said. "I was completely terror-struck—and acted as if I knew what I was doing!"

Kentridge had come to view the opera as a reflection of the Enlightenment, whose contradictions and ramifications were personified in the character of the high priest Sarastro. "Mozart's opera opened in 1791, two years after the French Revolution," he said. "By 1792 or 1793, you had the first real Sarastros in the Committee of Public Safety and in Robespierre, people who said that in the interests of pure rationalism and what's best for everyone we'll chop the heads off thousands of people. Sarastro decides to kidnap Pamina, and put her under the control of his thug, because he knows what's good for her. That's in the libretto, but the music that Mozart gives him is very calming and reassuring." Kentridge was not about to politicize Mozart. His thinking led, however, to a separate but related work called "Black Box," another miniature theatre, with a twenty-two-minute scenario of filmed projections and puppet figures on mechanical tracks. The subject is colonialism in Africa, which, as Kentridge points out, was justified by the European powers as bringing enlightenment to the Dark Continent, and the piece makes reference to the near-annihilation by German colonial troops, in 1904, of the Herero tribe in German Southwest Africa—now Namibia. The soundtrack is a collage of Namibian songs and "Magic Flute" arias, somewhat altered—one of Sarastro's arias, instead of being sung, is played by a military brass band. The most delightful moment in Kentridge's "Magic Flute" comes in the first act, when an animated rhinoceros, hearing the flute, dances on its hind legs and turns somersaults; "Black Box" includes archival film footage from a 1912 rhinoceros hunt in Cameroon, which ends with the rhino thrashing in agony, and two white hunters cutting off its horn.

"The Magic Flute" was warmly received when it came to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in 2007, after highly successful runs in Brussels, Lille, and Naples. The *Times'* Anne Midgette called it "an exuberant dialogue between drawing and music." Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Matthew Gurewitsch said that it "has Kentridge's fingerprints all over it, yet never betrays Mozart's generosity and sweet temper." The production disclosed a new dimension in Kentridge's art, a playful, lighthearted expansiveness that had not been evident in his earlier work, and an ability to operate on a large—the largest possible—theatrical scale. A number of viewers, this one among them, had reservations. I loved the animations, which filled the stage with mathematical diagrams and fast-moving projections, in white light, of abstract and natural forms—Kentridge had filmed himself, as Papageno the bird-catcher, holding and releasing wonderfully lifelike doves—but there were times when I felt that the visual effects were a distraction from the music. This may well have had to do with the BAM performance, which was handicapped by a lack of rehearsal time and the absence of great singers. "Some people hated it because there was too much to watch," Kentridge said, when I mentioned my reaction. "But opera is an impure medium, combining many different elements. It's also a completely contemporary form, in that what's possible today, in combining image and music, was not possible thirty years ago. The whole popular-music industry is based on music videos. The operatic tradition of combining large-scale visual spectacle with live music is the pattern of popular music-making now."

Kentridge discovered "The Nose" when he bought a book of Gogol's short stories in an airport bookstore. Although he reads a lot of fiction, he says that there are gaps in his knowledge of the classics, and Gogol was one of them. He was struck by the tale's affinities with the absurdist strain in art and literature, which, in the last century, had moved from the periphery into the mainstream. (A note in the introduction to the Gogol volume led him to Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy," written the century before Gogol, which tells of a man whose nose was squashed flat at birth.) Kentridge learned of the Shostakovich opera soon afterward. Completed in 1930, when the composer was twenty-two, the production was shut down after a few performances, a victim of Stalin's brutal crushing of the post-Revolutionary avant-garde. "It's about a world gone awry, about dislocated logic and a driven irrationality where language stops making sense," Kentridge told me. "That's very much part of the nineteen-thirties in Russia, the period of the show trials. The absurd is the only form adequate to describe that breakdown of logic and rationality."

Early in 2005, Peter Gelb, who would soon take over as the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, approached Kentridge about staging an opera for the Met. Gelb has defined his primary goal as helping the Met "reclaim its place in the forefront of American theatre and world theatre," and he has hired some of the most innovative theatre and film directors to re-stage operas in the repertory or to direct new productions. The opera Gelb had in mind for Kentridge was Verdi's early and rarely performed "Attila." Kentridge thought about it overnight, and then, as Gelb recalls, "he came back and said he was not remotely interested in 'Attila,' but how about 'The Nose'?" Gelb did some quick research. "I was aware of the opera, but I didn't know it," he said. "I also had to find out if Valery Gergiev, who is the leading Shostakovich conductor, would be willing to take it on. He was, and I told William we would do it. It was very quick. I was convinced."



"Last week, he was a sex addict. This week, he's a not-calling addict."

Gelb, Kentridge, and his four-person team went to St. Petersburg, where Gergiev arranged a special performance of "The Nose" for them, as part of the White Nights Festival. From there, Kentridge went straight to Johannesburg, where he set to work. It took him several months to work out the visual language of the piece; its main element is a huge collage, in the Constructivist style, of newspaper pages and agitprop slogans in Russian, German, and French, against which images would be projected. Although the actual nose appears and sings in only two scenes of the opera, Kentridge produced countless drawings of it, some of which will appear as projected images—the nose on horseback, the nose dancing (its legs are sometimes Kentridge's and sometimes Anna Pavlova's, in archival footage). "The shape of the nose is my nose," Kentridge told me, beaming, "an Ashkenazi Jewish nose." He clearly had enormous fun conceiving the visual elements. The Met agreed to pay for two extended workshops, one in Johannesburg and one in New York. (It is also sharing the cost of a European production of the opera, which will take place in 2011, in Aix-en-Provence.) Gelb has signed Paulo Szot, the Brazilian baritone who won a Tony Award in 2008 for his performance in "South Pacific," to sing the leading role of Kovalyov. There will be six performances at the Met, starting March 5th. Asked whether "The Nose" might return to the Met next season, Gelb was cagey. "I don't know," he said. "It may have to wait for the next nasal festival."

When Kentridge left New York in November, he was headed for Naples, where a show of large-scale tapestries, made from his drawings by a small weaving studio in Johannesburg, was opening at the Capodimonte Museum. After that, he looked forward to two months at home. Alice, his older daughter, now fully recovered from a yearlong ordeal with cancer, was getting married in January, at the house, and the whole family would be there. When things finally quiet down, late this spring, Kentridge has promised himself a sabbatical, a year or so of reading, thinking, eating well, and drinking "better wine than I deserve." He also plans to make another animated film from charcoal drawings, "going back to basics, which is to-say, drawing Johannesburg." I asked him whether he had ever seriously considered living somewhere else. "Never to the extent of making plans," he replied. "Just vague longings. Each time I go to Paris, I say, 'What a gorgeous city—why don't we live here?'"

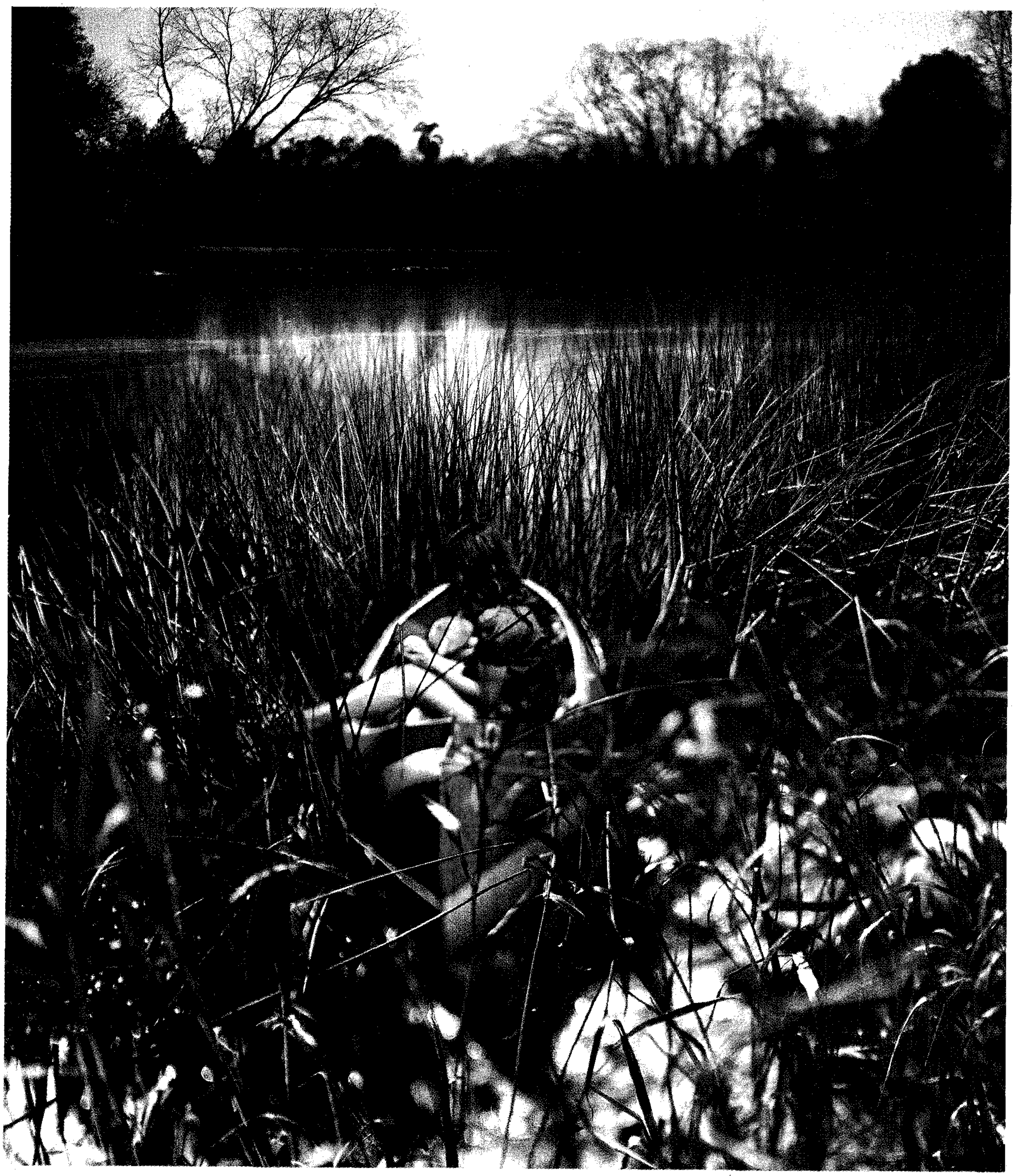
One of the strange things about post-apartheid South Africa, he added, is that so little has changed. "In many parts of the country, it hasn't changed at all. Children in poor rural schools still get a miserable education. It's also true that the main beneficiaries since the ending of apartheid are white South Africans. No sacrifices have been required. No one's lost their beautiful house. There's lots of violence around, but you had that before—now you have more of it. That's the price of extreme inequality. There may not be a correlation between poverty and crime but there's a very clear one between extreme inequality and crime, and a whole history of reasons why it's as nasty and violent as it is. In South Africa, there is never an assumption that a calm and gentle death is one's birthright. September 11th in America had an interesting effect here. It helped lots of us understand that living in a dangerous, unstable world was not only a South African phenomenon, and that made people here less anxious to leave."

In the end, Kentridge stays because South Africa's compromised society reflects and nourishes his work. "My work is about the provisionality of the moment," he told me. "I've become very suspicious of certainty. First comes understanding the value of doubt. For me, that's how we go through the world." ♦

FICTION

A DEATH IN KITCHAWANK

BY T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE



Saturday, just after two, the sun a hot compress on her shoulders and scalp, the shrieks and catcalls of the children as they splash in the shallows a kind of symphony of the usual. Behind her, the sharp *thwock* of the dense black rubber ball as it rockets from the paddle and slaps the wall, regular as a heartbeat till one of the men miscalculates and it freezes in cardiac arrest on the tail of a stifled curse. One beat, two, and here it comes again: *thwock*. She's thinking that she should have brought her straw hat with her to the beach—she wouldn't want a thin red line of sunburn etched into the parting of her hair—but she'll worry about that later, or maybe not at all. She hasn't worn her hat in a week or more now—she hates hats, hats are a thing of her mother's day—and her tan is deep, even at her hairline. She's wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses, new from the drugstore yesterday, and last year's black one-piece, which is maybe a little tight around the hips and waist, but so what? She's not on display here. This is her beach, her community, her lake. These are her friends and neighbors gathered in their beach chairs and sprawled across their fluffed-up towels and beach blankets, with their paperbacks and newspapers and Hebrew National wieners. This is the peace at the center of life. This, this Saturday in July, as her mind runs free and her only worry is to shift the straps on her shoulders and gloss her lips to keep them from drying out.

In the house, which she could see if she craned her neck to look back past the concession stand and the paddleball courts and the big open grassy field, where teen-age couples are strolling hand in hand, is the refrigerator, new three years ago and as cluttered as if it had been there a century. In its cool dark depths are the steaks in a covered dish of honey-ginger marinade, the potato salad and coleslaw she put up after breakfast, and the Rose's lime juice and vodka for the gimlets. All is well. And so what if the warm shifting sand beneath her feet has to be trucked in every other year at the expense of the Kitchawank Colony Association, its hundreds of billions of individual grains disappearing into the high grass, washing into the lake, adhering to toes and arches and tanned sinewy ankles only to wind up on bathroom tiles and beneath the kitchen sink? It's as essential as air, as the water itself: how could you have a beach without it?

When she next opens her eyes it's to the quick cold shock of Susan, her youngest, snuggling in beside her, everything wet suddenly, as if a whole basket of fish had been upended in her lap. She feels the bunched knees poking at her, the shuddering rib cage and chattering teeth, hears her own voice jump up: "Get off, honey, you're all wet!" And Susan, freckled, stick-limbed, ten years old, snuggling tighter. "I'm cold, Mommy." She reaches behind her for the beach bag and the towel, and then she's wrapping her daughter and holding her close till the shivering stops and Susan springs loose to chase half a dozen other kids to the concession stand. She lifts her sunglasses for a moment to watch her go, and here are the Sollovays, the Greens, the Goldsteins, settling in around her in a wash of greeting and banter and sheer high spirits. Marsha Goldstein, her legs silken and her lips fluttering around her smile, offers a cigarette, but she prefers her own and they both light up and let the tobacco lift them, until in unison, as if they'd rehearsed it, they throw back their heads and exhale in long twin plumes of blue. "What time did you want us tonight?" Marsha asks. "Five-ish?"

"Yes," she says, "yes, that'll be perfect," and she glances over her shoulder, past the courts and the chain-link fence and the screen of trees to where her house sits tranquilly on its own little rise—the only house, of the two hundred or more in the Colony, that looks directly onto the lake, a fact of which she tries not to be too sinfully proud. And it's funny, because with the way the light comes off the lake and the big picture window stands in shadow she can see into her own kitchen and the table there, already set for dinner, the clock on the yellow wall, time ticking by, and it's almost as if she were in two places at once.

[Forgive me for stepping in here but I do want to get this right—the fact is I may have been there that day. The threads of the past are so snarled that, thirty-five years on, I've lost the ability to separate them with any clarity. But if I was there I would have been on the paddleball court, playing in a fiercely competitive and very physical foursome with Miriam's husband, Sid, and her two sons—Alan, who was twenty-six, and Lester, my best friend, who was then twenty-two, like me. And I would have entered the next scene, too, the dinner scene, preceded by cocktails and the long unwinding of a muggy Saturday afternoon, the corded muscles of my legs gone limp in the afterglow of exercise and the slow seep of alcohol.]

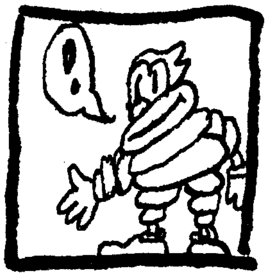
She's got both fans going, the one at the kitchen window and the big lazy ceiling fan revolving in a slow slippage of optical illusion over the table, but she's still dripping. Marsha's with her, their drinks perspiring on the counter while they stand elbow to elbow at the cutting board, slicing long squared-off strips of carrot and wafer-thin slivers of Vidalia onion for the salad, dicing cucumbers and halving cherry tomatoes still warm from the garden, Marsha, who was the maid of honor at her wedding just as she was the maid of honor when Marsha married David in a time when there were only the four of them. Now the boys are in their twenties, Susan's ten, and Marsha's daughter, Seldy, is sixteen, or, no, seventeen.

From the living room comes the sound of the men, their voices rich and pleased as they call down the questions of the day, revile Nixon, trade quips with the boys. Les has begun to wear his hair long and dress in bell-bottoms and spangled shirts, in confraternity with his friend T., who looks so satisfied he could be flying across the room on his own magic-carpet ride. She's had her moments of worry—or not worry, really, just concern—over whether the boys have been experimenting with tea or grass or whatever they call it these days, but she's never said anything. And won't. She doesn't want to harp.

They're just sitting down to dinner—to the artichokes, one per plate, the grill out on the deck sending up smoke under the steaks—when Seldy, in a yellow sundress that shows off the figure she's been growing into over the past year, drifts into the room, late as usual. Her mother says, "It's about time," and her father makes a quip about how she must've got lost on the gruelling four-minute drive from their house, but Sid and the three boys are dumbstruck for one thunderous instant. This is the face of beauty, and though they're all family here, though

DETAIL: ALEJANDRO CHASKIELBERG, "HER OWN WATER" [2007]/YOSSI MILO GALLERY

Seldy's like a daughter to Sid and a sister to the boys—Miriam's boys, anyway—none of that matters. Sid's the first to break the spell, his voice rising to emphasize the joke: "Well, Jesus Christ, we thought we were going to wilt away and starve waiting for you." And then the boys are falling all over themselves to wave and grin and ante up the wit, and Seldy, flushing, slides into the empty seat between Alan and Les, letting the steam from the artichoke rise gently about her face and the long trailing ends of her hair slip from her shoulders to sway gracefully over her plate.



It is then, just as Sid rises to check on the steaks (nobody here wants anything but rare and rarer, and he'd be offended if they did), that the first eruption of thunder rolls across the lake to shake the house and rattle the ice cubes in the drinks that Miriam has just freshened. The sky goes instantly dark, as if a shade had been drawn over the day. She's wondering if she should go and rummage through the kitchen drawer for the candles left over from Hanukkah when the storm chases a cool breeze through the screens, and Marsha waves her napkin in front of her face, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thank God," she says. "Oh, yes, bring it on."

The first raindrops, big and slow and widely dispersed, begin to thump at the shingles, and there's Sid, with his muscled arms and bald head, out on the deck, hustling the lid off the grill and flipping the steaks, the worn boards spotted all around him. "Better hurry, Sid!" David calls, and then it's really coming down, the original deluge, and this is funny, deeply, infectiously funny—Sid flipping steaks and wet through in an instant—because there's no harm done, no harm at all. They'll have candles, they'll eat, and the evening, with its rising fertile smell of grass and the earth at the edge of the woods, will settle in around them, as cool and sweet as if the whole neighborhood were air-conditioned.

[I see I've written myself into the scene after all, a refugee from my own fractured family, at peace in the moment. Fair enough. But peace neither lasts nor suffices, and the fact was that Lester and I pursued the available pharmacopoeia far more assiduously than Miriam could ever have imagined. We were stoned at that very moment, I'm sure of it, and not on anything as innocuous as marijuana—stoned, and feeling blessed. Feeling, in the midst of all that radiant love and tranquillity, that we were getting away with something.]

Time jumps and jumps again, the maples struck with color, the lake giving up a thin sheet of wrinkled ice along the shore, and then there's the paucity of winter with its skeletal trees and the dead fringe of reeds stuck like an old man's beard in the gray jaws of the ice. The months spin out until the pointer stops on a day in March, gray as death, Susan working against the chill in the unheated basement with the girls from the Explorers' Club at school, building a canoe from a kit shipped in all the way from Minnesota, while Miriam tiptoes around upstairs, arranging warm-from-the-oven oatmeal cookies on a platter and pouring hot cocoa from the thermos into six porcelain teacups, each with its own marshmallow afloat in the center like a white spongy island.

When she opens the basement door, there's an overpowering smell of epoxy and the distilled vinegar that Sid got for cleanup, and she worries about that, about the fumes, but the girls seem oblivious. They cluster around her in a greedy, jostling pack, hands snatching at the cookies and the too-hot cups. Susan already has three cookies clenched in her hand, privilege of the house, as she stabs her tongue at the marshmallow in her cup, a mustache of chocolate sketching itself in above her upper lip.

"Shouldn't you girls have some ventilation in here?" Miriam says, just to hear herself, but they're fine, they assure her, and it's going great, it really is.

The canoe, lying overturned on a pair of sawhorses, has been a long winter's project, Sid doing the lion's share of the work on weekends, though the girls have been fairly diligent about the hand-sanding, the cutting and fitting of the fibreglass cloth, and the slow smoothing of the epoxy over it. It's just that they're at an age when gathering for any purpose outside of school is a lark, and they can't help frittering away their time gossiping, spinning records, dancing to the latest beat or craze or whatever it is, their thin arms flailing, hair in motion, legs going like pogo sticks. They make fast work of the cookies and chocolate. And now, sated, they watch her warily, wondering why she's lingering when it's clear that her motherly duties have been dispensed with, and so she gathers up the cups, sets them on the tray, and starts back up the stairs.

Thanks to Sid, who is a father like no other, despite the fact that he has to drag himself home every night after a stifling commute and the kind of hard physical labor on one job site after another that would prostrate a man half his age, the canoe is ready for its maiden voyage by the time the ice shrinks back from the shore and the sun makes its first evanescent return. Miriam sits stiffly on the bench by the playground, Marsha beside her, while the girls divide themselves democratically into two groups of three, roll up their jeans in the icy shallows, and see the first group off in a mad frantic windmilling of forearms and paddles. "Be careful, now!" she calls, and she's pleased to see that her daughter has been gracious or, at least, patient enough to wait her turn in the second group. As Susan leans forward to push the canoe off, her ankles chapped with the cold, her face long and grave and bursting with expectation, it's too much for Miriam, and she has to look away to where the paddles flash in the pale depleted sunlight and the canoe cuts back and forth across the black surface like the blades of her pinking shears.

Marsha, who has come to lend moral support, lights a second cigarette off the end of her first and flicks the still smoldering butt into the dun grass at their feet, exhaling with a long complicated sigh. "Too cute by half," she says.

Miriam's on her feet—she wants to let go but just can't help herself—listening to her own voice skitter over the water and ricochet back again: "Don't get too far out! Girls! Girls?"

"I heard from Seldy last night," Marsha's saying as Miriam eases back down on the bench. Seldy's at Stony Brook. A junior. On scholarship and majoring in math, she's that smart.

"And how is she?"

A pause. The canoe, far out now—halfway to the other shore and its dense dead accumulation of shoulder-high weeds—makes a wobbly, long-stemmed turn and starts back, the girls paddling in unison, finally getting it. "Terrible.

Worse than"—Marsha's voice, wadded with grief and anger, chokes in her throat—"I don't know, *anything*."

"What? What is it? She isn't—"

"She's dropping out."

Miriam is so surprised she can't help repeating the phrase, twisting it with the inflection of disbelief. "She's dropping out?" Caught up in the moment, she doesn't stop to consider that both of her own sons dropped out in their time, too.

"It's that boy."

"What boy?"

"You know, the one from high school that went to the community college for all of half a semester—Richie?"

For a moment, Miriam's confused, the name caught on her lips like an invocation—*Richie, Richie*?—and then suddenly she can picture him, tall and rangy in a swimsuit so tight you could see every crease and fold, the washboard stomach, hair that fell across his face like a raven's wing, Richie Spano, the wise guy, the joker, with his braying laugh and the look on his face when you caught him out that said, I am so far above this.

"You're kidding."

"I wish."

And here's the canoe, scraping at the sand that will have to be replaced again this spring or they'll all be hip-deep in mud, and Susan now trading places with the girl in back, the power position, raising her paddle high as if it were the honed glistening spear of a warrior out for conquest.

A puff of smoke. A long mournful inhalation and Marsha won't look her in the eye. "They're going to get a place in the Village, she says. Live free. Do their thing."

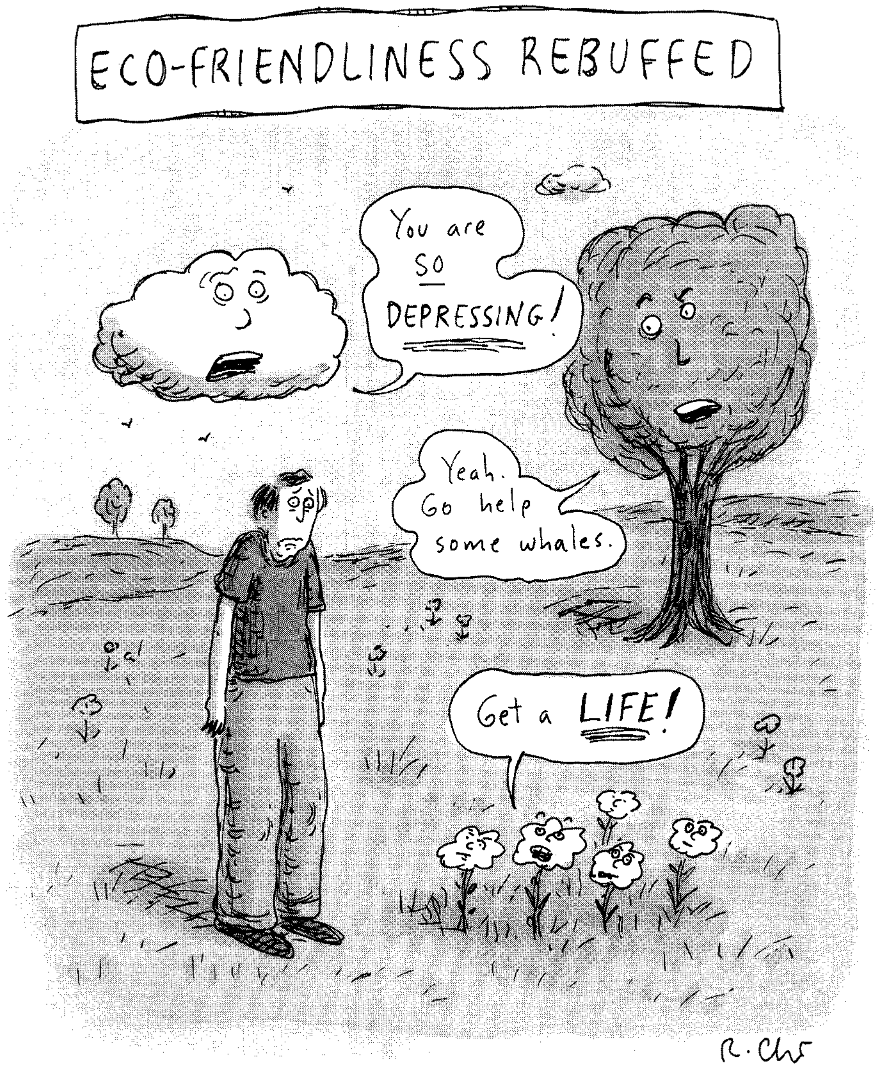
The canoe, Miriam sees, is stuck there under the weight of the girls, and she has to restrain herself from interfering until finally Susan digs her paddle into the bottom to push them off and the canoe rides free in a shimmer of light.

"Or some such crap," Marsha says.

[I was already gone by then, trying to redeem myself in grad school, and Les was in San Francisco, managing the first Cajun-style restaurant to appear there, but I knew Richie Spano from the time Les and I had rented a house in the Colony three years earlier. There was a lot of traffic in that house—friends, musicians, druggies, friends of friends, friends of druggies—and Richie drifted in from time to time. He was quick on his feet, cocky, borderline obnoxious, with a mean streak that was something sick. One night, apropos of nothing, he plucked the darts out of the board on the kitchen wall and nailed my girlfriend's cat with one of them—which stuck there in the stripe of fur along its spine, quivering like a banderilla, until the cat vanished and bled all over the carpet in the back room and cost thirty-five dollars to repair at the vet's, money I paid out of my own pocket because Richie Spano wasn't about to pay anybody anything.]

Miriam is there at the window one soft mist-hung morning in the spring of a year when the canoe has been all but forgotten, chained to a rail on a grassy strand off to the far side of the beach in a mismatched tumble of upended boats, the girls on to other pursuits now, most of them boy-related. Susan is seventeen, too nervous by half over her college applications, her A.P. courses, the way Mr. Honer presses her to practice though she's only third violin and Mr. Davies rides roughshod over the Thespian Club, but her room is decorated with posters of shirtless, long-haired boys posing with guitars in their hands.

Miriam's sipping a cup of tea while her cigarette levitates smoke at her elbow, caught in a recollection of her own seventeen-year-old self, when she first came up from Stelton for the summer to stay with her cousins in a bungalow not three city blocks from where she's sitting now. No one would have described her as shy back then, and when she went to the beach with her cousin Molly the first afternoon and saw a group of boys sweating over a little black ball on the paddleball court she went right up to them, not five feet away, and watched as they leaped and grimaced and slammed at the ball with all the raw frustrated adolescent power boiling up out of them, until they began to falter, to hit out, to lose the rhythm of the game—and it was no secret why. It was because she was there, with her pretty, dark features, which everyone said were just like Rita Hayworth's, with her nails freshly done and a white towel slung in-


ECO-FRIENDLINESS REBUFFED
You are so DEPRESSING!
Yeah. Go help some whales.
Get a LIFE!

"You can tell when people don't have pets, because they start to look like their plants."

• •

souciantly over one shoulder, dressed in the swimsuit she'd spent the better part of an hour admiring in the full-length mirror at Genung's before she said yes and counted out the money at the cash register. There were four boys playing and half a dozen others sprawled on the grass at the edge of the court, but the one who caught her eye—the tall one, with slicked-back dirty-blond hair, shrinking T-shirt, and black high-top basketball shoes that he wore without socks—was Sid.

She shifts in her seat, lifts the cigarette to her lips to consolidate the recollection, but the cigarette is dead. And the tea—the tea's gone cold. She's about to push herself up and light the gas under the kettle when a movement on the ball field catches her eye. There's someone out there—two people, a boy and a girl—and that strikes her as odd, because it's a school day and though it's officially spring the leaves of the trees are still wound tight in the grip of their buds and it's cold, especially with the way the mist is pushing in off the lake. Hardly beach weather.

She's already put up dinner—a pot roast simmering in the Crock-Pot that Les gave her for her birthday last year—and she's been through the newspaper twice. Is she bored? Lonely? In need of stimulation? She supposes so. She's been spending an awful lot of time sitting at the window lately, talking on the telephone or just dreaming, and she's been putting on weight, too. But what *are* they doing out there?

In the next moment she's in the front hall, shrugging into her faded blue parka, and then she's out in the air, heading down the path to where her property ends and the single-lane gravel road loops through the high chain-link gate and peters out in the beach area. She veers left, onto the grass of the outfield, and feels it wet on the worn suède moccasins she slipped on at the door. When she gets closer—when she's halfway to the two figures bent over what looks to be a big gray-green stone protruding from the grass—she recognizes Seldy. Seldy, in bell-bottom jeans and a serape and some sort of leather cowboy hat pulled down so far it masks her eyes. And who's that with her? Richie. Richie, looking as if he were dressed for Halloween, with his long hair, his tie-dyed shirt, and a ragged cloth overcoat he might have dug out of the pile at the Salvation Army.

She's not thinking, really—and the way she's dressed and with her hair uncombed and no makeup on she's not especially in the mood to see anybody at the moment—but she's here now and that thing on the ground, she sees, is no rock. It's moving. And the boy—*Richie*—is stabbing at it with a fallen branch. In the very instant she opens her mouth to say "Hi," startling them both, she realizes what it is: a turtle. One of the big ridge-backed turtles that come up out of the lake to lay their eggs on the apron of sand at the edge of the ball field.

Seldy tries for a smile and only partly succeeds. Richie ignores her.

"Are you up visiting?" she hears herself say, even as Richie forces the stick into the animal's mouth and the jaws clamp down with an audible crack.

"See that?" he says. "One of these things can take your hand off if you're not careful."

Very softly, as if afraid to raise her voice, Seldy says, "Yes," but that's puzzling, because Marsha didn't breathe a word about a visit, and it takes a moment for Miriam to realize that they must be staying with Richie's parents on the other side of the lake—or not even on the lake, really, but in a development off Amazon Road. And then a scenario from a year ago presents itself, a dinner party she was giving for a new couple, the Abramsons—he's a doctor in the city—and how Seldy, up for the weekend, had sat rigidly between her parents and barely said a word all night. Except to be negative. At one point, early on, before the Abramsons and the others arrived, Miriam had been rearranging the flowers in the big cut-glass vase she'd inherited from her mother, soliciting Marsha's opinion, just chattering, that was all, when Seldy, her face sour and her lips drawn down, snapped at her out of nowhere. "Jesus, Miriam, it's only the Colony, only the sticks," she said, and her voice was like a saw cutting the house in two. "You'd think you were Mrs. Dalloway or something."

It's cold—raw—and she tightens the parka around her. She's about to say something inane like "That's nice," when Richie jerks the branch from the turtle's mouth and brings it down hard on the slick gleaming carapace, not once but twice. He's lifting it again, lifting it high, when she steps forward and takes hold of the end of it so quickly she surprises herself. "What are you doing?" she demands, her voice gone harsh in her throat.

To his credit, he doesn't resist, and the stick is hers now, to drop in the grass at her feet while the turtle, hissing, thrashes its head back and forth as if it can't pinpoint the source of the threat. "Thing doesn't deserve to live," he says, and his eyes are unfocussed, fully dilated, as if he were dreaming on his feet. "They're just trash anyway. They kill fish, ducks even. They—"

"No," she says, cutting him off, "no. They belong here. They have a right to live just like everything else." She wants to go on, wound up all of a sudden, but he's already turned his back on her, stalking across the grass in his high-heeled boots—purple, purple boots—and she's left there with Seldy. Who has nothing to say. Her best friend's daughter, a girl she's known since she was in the cradle, and she has nothing to say. Miriam wants to invite her up to the house for tea, a bagel, a good long chat about dropping out, about fashion, and respect for nature, and life in the Village—*freaks, they call themselves freaks*—but she finds, in that moment, that she has nothing to say, either.

[I remember stopping by one year during spring break and finding Miriam in a lawn chair out on the fringe of the ball field, wrapped in an old sleeping bag, keeping watch over a pair of nesting turtles while a pickup game went on behind her. I must have spent an hour crouched there beside her, catching up on things, as the turtles patiently extruded their eggs, as if time had gone back a millennium and there were no lawnmowers or automobiles or boys with sticks and rocks and baseball bats poised to annihilate them. And where was Sid? Working. Always working. He'd had his reverses on the stock market and elsewhere, a tough year, but he was still a member of the tin-knockers' union and always had work. As far as I could tell, he didn't even know turtles existed.]

And it's another day, a year further on, Susan at Rutgers and loving it, or so she says on the odd nights when she bothers to call, and Miriam has just got off the phone with her cousin Molly, who lives in Connecticut now and whose youngest—Mark, just twenty-four—has had some sort of nervous breakdown. Or worse. He's been in treatment since he was a teen-ager, and nobody wants to call it schizophrenia, because you don't come back from that. They say that it runs in families, and, when Miriam comes to think of it, Molly's father was no mental paragon, scared of his own face in the mirror, hearing voices, talking nonsense half the time. She just thanks her lucky stars her own children turned out normal, though sometimes she wonders about Les, out there on the West Coast, unmarried at thirty and running with a fast crowd, restaurant people, bar people, people who use drugs and don't go to bed till the sun rises.

She pushes herself up from the table, aching in her joints—and there's a sharp pain in the calf of her left leg, a kind of thrilling or buzzing that goes away almost as soon as she puts a name to it. From the window she can see the wall of the paddleball courts, which are empty at this hour on a weekday, and beyond them Rose Shapiro—eighty and stooped—pacing the beach as if she were making her way across the steppes of Russia like poor Dr. Zhivago, and the sight only depresses her the more. You marry, have children, cook, clean, get sick, get old, pace the beach till you can't even remember who you are. That's life. That's what it is.

It is then that she thinks of the canoe. Susan had it out last summer once or twice, but aside from that it has just sat there inert for years. She's suddenly seized with the idea of it, its smooth white skin pressed to the belly of the water, clouds scudding by overhead, the release of it, gliding, just gliding. She makes herself a sandwich at the kitchen counter, pours juice into the thermos, selects a paperback from the shelf in the den, and goes out into the day and the sunlight, which flares with sudden brilliance, feeling as if she were off on an adventure.

She has some trouble with the combination lock—it's rusty, that's all—and then, once she's got the chain free and tries to flip the boat over, she finds it's unaccountably heavy. There's no one to see her, really, aside from Mrs. Shapiro, who barely glances up from her own shoelaces, but still she feels embarrassed to think that she can't even flip over a canoe, a thing she must have done a hundred times when she was a girl. Is she really that old and weak? She sucks in her breath and gives it another try, like one of those puffed-up Russian weight lifters in the Olympics on TV, and there it is, like a miracle, right side up and thumping reverberantly to the ground. The sound echoes out over the water and comes back again, thrilling with the chatter of birds and the soughing of the breeze in the branches overhead. It's April. She's fifty-eight years old. And her feet, her bare feet, are in the water now, the canoe hovering before her and threatening to tip first one way and then the other until all at once she's firmly planted in the seat and the paddle is working in her sure tight grip and the shore retreats behind her.

It's a joy. A lark. And almost immediately she finds her rhythm, the motion—dip and rise and dip again—coming back to her as if it were ingrained in her muscle memory, and maybe it is, though it's been more years than she can count. She feels the sun on her face and when she shifts position it wraps itself across her shoulders like an electric blanket, warming and gentle. By the time she thinks to look back to where her house sits reduced on the horizon, she's nearly to the far side of the lake. What she's thinking is that she should do this more often—get out, enjoy life, breathe the air—and she makes a promise to herself that, starting tomorrow, she will. It's not even noon yet when she lays the paddle athwart the gunwales and unwraps her sandwich, pastrami on rye, just letting the boat drift, and isn't this the best pastrami on rye she's ever had? The canoe rocks. She lies back, for just a moment, and closes her eyes.

When she wakes, she can't imagine where she is, despite the evidence all

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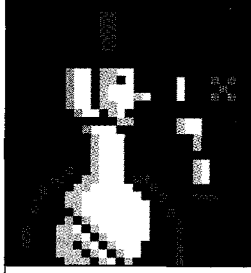

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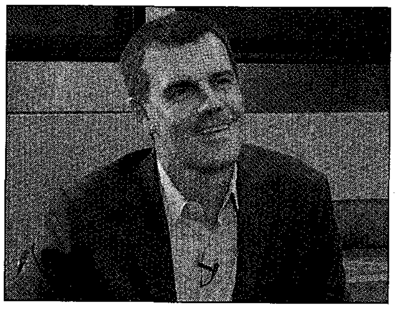

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around her. It takes her a minute to come fully to herself. The sun is gone, the clouds bleeding across the sky. And the wind is stronger now, damper, sweeping out of the south with a scent of rain. She's not wearing her watch—she left it at home for fear of getting it wet—and that further disorients her, as if knowing the time would put everything back in its place. Nothing for it but to paddle, but which way? She can't see the shore from here, not through the low-bellied clouds. As well as she can figure, the canoe must have been carried all the way down the lake while she dozed. All right. She'll just orient herself, that's all. She swivels around, scanning both shores till she finds a fixed point, the pale white tower of the seminary all the way up on Stony Street emerging suddenly from the clouds and the canopy of the distant trees, which means she has to go in . . . that direction, there, behind her now. She feels the relief wash over her—at least she knows where she is—until she reaches for the paddle, or the place where the paddle was, and finds it gone.

[This became a family legend, trotted out at dinner parties over the years, the story of how Miriam used her hands to paddle the boat to the nearest point, which unfortunately lay on the far side of the lake, and how she walked a good mile and a half barefoot before she got to Kitchawank Village and the pay phone in front of the liquor store there and realized she didn't have a cent to her name, let alone a dime. How she turned around and walked another three blocks on the cold hard unforgiving pavement till she got to Lowenstein's Deli, and Sy Lowenstein let her use the store phone to call Sid, who was installing heating ducts in a fourplex in Mount Kisco, where, thank God, they had a phone already hooked up on the ground floor, to please come get her before she froze to death. And how Sid let out one of his arpeggiated "Jesus Christ!"s and went twenty miles over the limit all the way back and then had to take her out to Fiorvanti's because there was no dinner on the table that night.]

It's an autumn day in an advancing year, the trees brilliant around the lake, each leaf painted a distinctive shade and the whole blended as in a Monet, when the phone rings and she picks up to hear from Molly, all the way out in Connecticut, that Seldy is getting married. To Richie Spano. Who, at thirty-four, is assistant manager of some sort of appliance store in Yorktown Heights and apparently making a decent living, though no one would have thought it from the way he was raised.

What goes through her mind first is a quick envious accounting—neither Alan nor Les is married yet, nor do they look to be soon, and Susan's been so busy studying for the bar that she hasn't had a date in months, or not that Miriam knows of, anyway—and then, as she forms the words "She hasn't told me anything about it," the hurt sets in. This is Marsha, her best friend all these years, maid of honor at her own wedding, and she can't call her with the news? Yes, well, maybe they have been like strangers lately, because things are different now, everybody getting older and more stay-at-home, the Colony breaking down as people die off or move away to Florida, but that doesn't mean you can't pick up a telephone.

As soon as she hangs up—before it occurs to her that maybe Marsha's ashamed to have such a son-in-law, not to mention a daughter throwing her life away—she's dialling. What she wants to say is "Hello, how are you?" so that she can ease into the situation as gracefully as possible, but her lips betray her. "Marsha?" she says. "How come you didn't tell me the good news?"

"Hello, Miriam, is that really you?" Marsha returns, her rasping voice as familiar as Miriam's own. "It's been too long, hasn't it, what with one thing and another. But news? What news are you talking about?"

"Seldy. Getting married. Are you planning a spring wedding, then—June? Like you and David? And Sid and me?"

There's a pause. The sound of a match striking and Marsha drawing smoke into her lungs. "No," she breathes finally, "no, that's not the way it is anymore."

And then there's the exegesis, a story stewed in its details and leaning heavily toward Richie and Richie's feelings. Richie—he grew up Catholic, did she know that?—hates religion, just *hates* it, and so does Seldy, or that's what she claims. They don't want a fuss. Don't want anybody there—and it was like pulling teeth just to get them to say that she and David could stand as witnesses when they go before the justice of the peace.

There's a pause. Silence on both ends of the line. "Well, could we at least host the reception?" Miriam puts in, feeling nothing but shame and disappointment for Marsha—and for herself, herself, too.

Very softly: "No, I don't think so. I think the Spanos—Rich, Sr., and Carlotta, the parents?—I think they have something planned."

She wants to shout back at her "You think?" but she goes numb all over, the phone pressed to her ear like a weight, like one of the dumbbells Alan has had in the far corner of the basement since he was in junior high. She hears herself peep and chirp back at Marsha as the conversation runs from the sorrows and sicknesses of people they know to the sad state of the Colony, how hardly anybody goes to the Association meetings anymore, how they could barely raise a crew to take the raft out of the water this fall, and then finally stalls. "Call soon," she hears herself say.

"Yes, I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

There are half a dozen people she wants to call, she's so wrought up, but for a long while, as the sun softens and the colors fade from the trees on the far side of the lake, she just sits there, feeling as if someone had died. What will Sid think? Sid's always had a soft spot for Seldy, as if she were his own daughter, and he's never liked Richie Spano, never liked what he stood for or where he came from or how he managed to get his hooks into her.

And then she's remembering the time, years ago now, down at the lake, when she snapped awake from a sun-soaked dream to a clamor of voices raised in anger. Sid's voice she recognized right away, a low buzz of outrage that meant he was right on the verge, but the other voice—a high querulous whine that seemed to choke on itself—she didn't know.

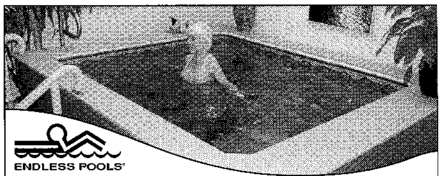
It was Richie Spano's. She turned to look over her shoulder and there he was, incandescent in the light, flailing his arms and screaming in Sid's face. He didn't want to wait for a court and he'd been waiting too long already, shouting it out as if he'd been gored, shouting that the whole idea of holding the court when you never lose was just bullshit, that was all. She pushed herself up from the beach chair in the moment that the two of them came at each other—and Sid, though he was slow to anger, could have torn Richie apart, and would have but for the intervention of David, who forced himself between them before the shoves could turn to blows. The next week, at the very next meeting of the Association, she raised her hand and made a motion to ban people from the beach who weren't members of the Colony—and she named Richie Spano specifically, because whose guest was he, anyway?

[My memories of Sid are of a man secure in himself, a big man—huge for his generation, six-three and two-twenty and none of it gone to fat—who gave the impression of power held in reserve. He was quick-witted and light on his feet, as verbally wicked as we ourselves were, and if you were admitted to his inner circle—and I was, I was—he would defend you against all comers. He'd fought the Germans, done a stint as a beat cop in Harlem, and then come home to the house on the lake to raise his family. I remember walking into a bar with him once, an unfamiliar place, down and dirty—he must have been in his mid-sixties then—and feeling untouchable, as safe as if I were sitting in my own living room.]

The tragic days of our lives, the days of accounting, begin like any other, with routine, with the bagel in the toaster and the coffee on the stove. So this is a morning. Sunlight streams through the big picture window, though it's cold, down to zero overnight, and the lake is sealed beneath a hard uneven tegument of ice so thick you could drive a truck across it. Miriam is feeling good, the pain in her hip subsiding under the ministrations of the prescription the doctor gave her, while Sid, home from work because things are slow, is sitting across the table from her, his head bowed to the paper, jaws working at the bagel she's smeared with cream cheese and decorated with a transparent wafer of lox and a sprinkle of capers. They're silent, she absorbed in her thoughts, he in the paper. The only sounds are the little ones, the tap of a spoon on the rim of a cup, the sigh of the knife as it divides another bagel.

"You want juice?" she says. "Fresh-squeezed, I can make fresh-squeezed, with the oranges Molly sent us from Florida?"

He glances up from the paper, his eyes a roving watery blue above the little wire-rimmed reading glasses clamped to the bridge of his nose. His fringe of hair, so thin now that it's barely there,



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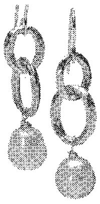

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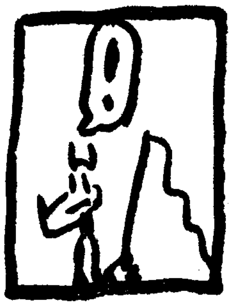
sticks up awkwardly in back. He’s dressed in bluejeans, moccasins, a thin gray sweatshirt she’s washed so many times it’s almost white. “Yeah,” he breathes, “I guess. But don’t go to any trouble.”

She’s already pushing herself up, about to say, “They’re going to go bad soon anyway,” when she glances reflexively out the window, just as she does a hundred times a day. There’s a scattering of snow like dust over the beach, the lake, the long low building that houses the concession stand. Everything is still, not even a bird moving among the stripped black branches of the trees. Susan says that Miriam needs a hobby, needs to get out more, and maybe she does spend too much time at the window, more interested in what’s outside than what’s here inside the house—if this is what old women do, biddies, yentas, then she guesses she’s one of them.

But something’s wrong, something’s out of place. She spots it then, a moving shadow in the deeper gloom cast by the overhanging roof of the concession stand, a man there, furtive, jerking back the door and ducking inside. “Sid,” she says, her blood quickening, “there’s somebody out there. I just—I think somebody just broke into the concession stand.”

“Who? What are you talking about?” He’s set down the paper now and he’s leaning forward to peer out the window, his lips pursed in concentration. “I don’t see anything.”

“He just went inside. I’m telling you. There’s somebody in there.”



This is an old story. There’ve always been problems with the place, the lake an irresistible draw for teenagers looking for trouble, and over the years the outbuildings have periodically been broken into, though there’s not much to steal, not in the off-season. They don’t seem to care. They just want to smash things, carve epithets into the counters, spray-paint their dirty slogans in the corners where children won’t be able to miss them come summer. It’s been that way since the first truckload of sand was laid down, though it’s worse now, always and progressively worse, because the community isn’t what it was. And never will be.

Sid doesn’t want to be bothered, she can see that. He thinks she’s crazy, calling him at work every time a strange car pulls into the lot, ringing up the Yorktown cops so many times they don’t even bother to send a patrol car anymore. He’s already turned back to the paper—“It’s nothing, Miriam, nothing, don’t worry yourself”—when she snatches up the binoculars. At first she can’t make out a thing, but then she focusses on the door, and, sure enough, it’s standing open and there’s movement there, a man’s face showing like an image in a slide projector, presented and withdrawn all in the space of an instant. “Sid. Sid!”

The look he gives her is not a loving look. He sighs in that way he has when he’s feeling put-upon, a sigh that could contain a novel’s worth of martyrdom and resentment. But then she’s handing him the binoculars and he’s standing there at the window, focussing in. After a moment, he emits a low curse. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters, and he strides across the room to the door even as she calls out “Take a coat!” and tries to fumble into her parka and slip on her boots all at the same time.

By the time she reaches the gates he’s already at the paddleball courts, moving swiftly, his shadow jogging on ahead of him. It’s cold and she’s forgotten her glasses. She digs into her pockets, but can come up with only one mitten. The pain in her hip is back, as sharp as a scalpel. She’s forcing herself on, breathing hard, breathing as if she were about to have a heart attack, when she hears the shouts ring out, and she makes the open door just in time to see Richie Spano, in a black peacoat and with a dark slash of a mustache slicing his face in two, standing over Sid, who’s stretched out supine on the gray concrete floor. What she doesn’t know, not yet, because she hardly ever talks to Marsha anymore, is that Vic Janove, who’s run the concession stand for the past twenty years and who’s become as close to the Goldsteins as she and Sid used to be, has asked Richie, as a favor, to look after the place while he’s in Florida.

Sid is down on the concrete. He’s sixty-eight years old and he’s just been in a fistfight. And Richie, the breath issuing from his mouth like one of those dialogue balloons in the funny papers, squares his shoulders, swings around, and walks right past her and out the door, and all he says, his voice so fierce and choked he can barely get it out, is “You bitch. You stupid interfering bitch.”

[This, too, is family legend, though it’s etched in pain. Sid, who had suffered what the neurologists quaintly call an insult to the brain when his head struck the concrete, was too stubborn to go to the doctor. He’d been knocked down before. It was nothing. He took a fistful of aspirin to quell his headache, asked Miriam to make him a cup of tea and maybe some soup, borscht or chicken noodle, it didn’t matter, because he wasn’t really hungry anyway. Three days later, when he finally relented, and she, unsteady on her feet herself, tried to help him down to the car, he collapsed in the driveway. He was dead before she could get the car door open.]

It’s a Saturday in July, another Saturday, the voices of children careering about her and the steady *thwock* of the dense black rubber ball punctuating her thoughts. These are new children, of course, the children and grandchildren of her friends and of the new people, too. She barely glances at the men on the paddleball court—they’re interchangeable, their bare legs furred in dark swirls, T-shirts glued to their torsos, sweatbands at their wrists. Their voices rise and fall, immemorial. Someone laughs. A radio buzzes, seeking the signal. *Thwock. Thwock.* She knows it will all be lost, everything we make, everything we love, everything we are.

Her eyes close, the sun pressing at her lids like a palpable weight. She can feel everything, every molecule of the hot aluminum slats of the chair and the fading grains of sand. She can taste the air and smell the cold depths of the lake, where no one ever drowns and every child comes home safely. There’s a splashing in the shallows, a dog raising its voice in ecstasy, the sharp tocsin of the lifeguard’s whistle. And then peace, carving out a space where the big green turtles rise lazily from the depths and the geese float free and a little girl, somebody’s daughter, comes wet and shivering to her mother’s sunstruck embrace. ♦

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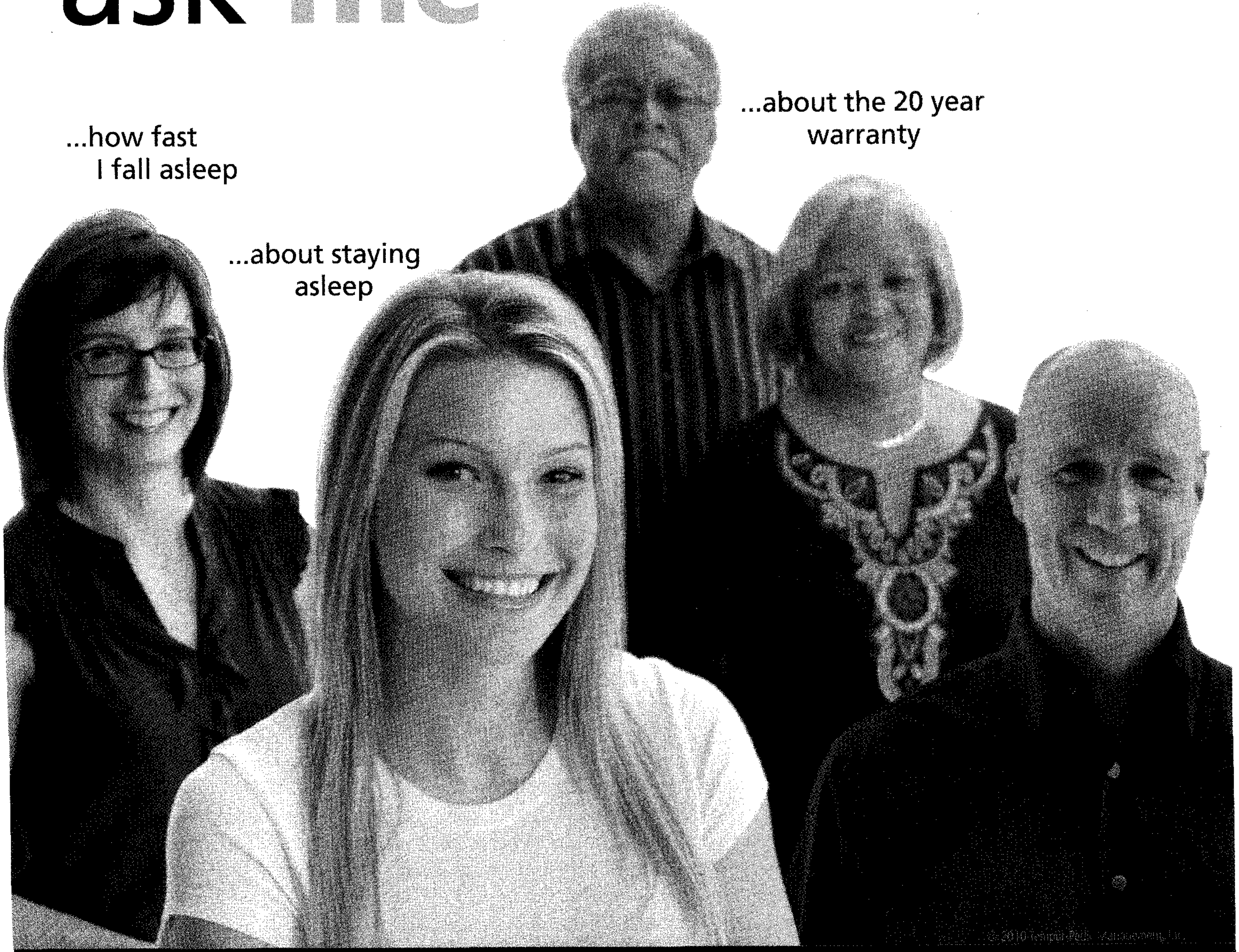
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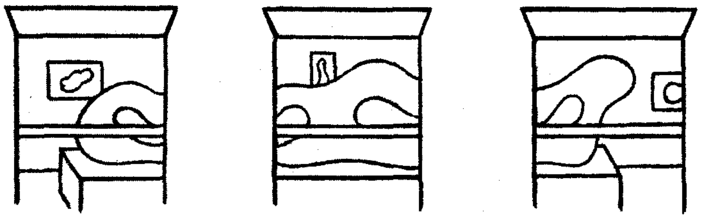


ON TELEVISION

JERSEY JETSAM

MTV goes to the beach.

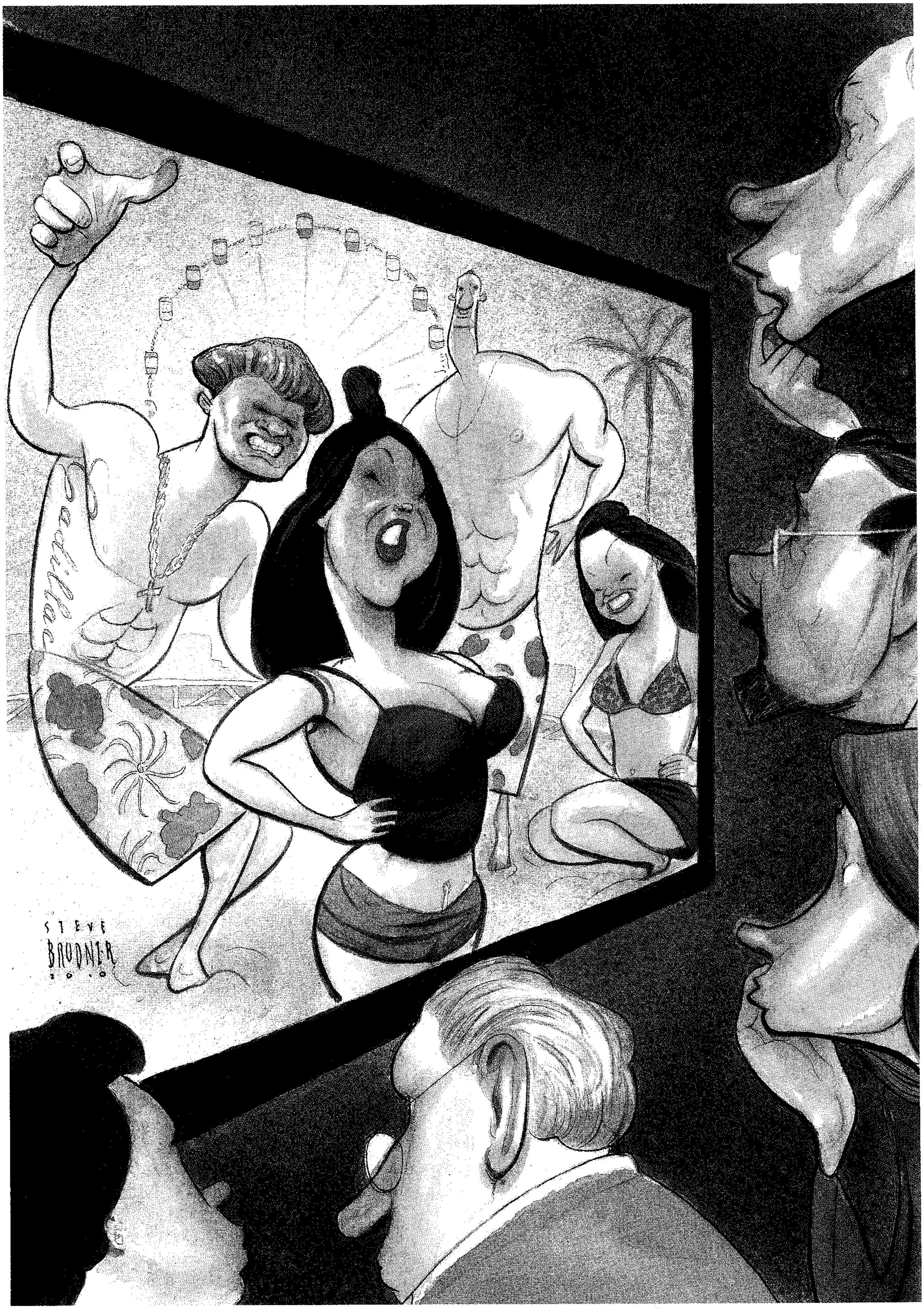
BY NANCY FRANKLIN

"Jersey Shore," a recent addition to MTV's fine family of reality shows, resembles the network's pioneering series "The Real World," which is now almost twenty years old—a human chemistry experiment with explosions guaranteed. In both shows, a group of carefully, cannily chosen people with big personalities—or personality disorders—are thrown together to live for a period of time with few obligations and all kinds of ways to create a lifetime of regrets, not least for viewers. The logo of these shows might be one of those large red plastic cups used for beer (and beer pong) at frat parties, and in evidence in many teen-agers' Facebook photos, signalling the overflow of alcohol and expectations that happens at large gatherings and the nausea that often results the next day, triggered partly by the fact that someone caught it all on camera. In "Jersey Shore," which takes place in the scruffy resort town of Seaside Heights, about a quarter of the way down New Jersey's coastline, the explosions began even before the show premièred, in early December. Promos showing a group of young men and women of Italian heritage making entertainingly ridiculous statements about themselves and whooping it up on the boardwalk at night—dancing, throwing punches, that kind of thing—advertised "Jersey Shore" as set in a "house like you've never seen, full of the hottest, tannest, craziest Guidos," and Italian-American groups, and eventually New Jersey tourism officials, protested and some of them called for MTV to cancel the series. Despite such dreamy free publicity, the first episode didn't get good ratings. But a sneak preview that ran at the end of the episode showed one of the women in the house being punched by a drunken galoot at a bar, locking in more controversy and more viewers—fifty per cent more, in fact, for the second episode.

This is where I say, "MTV had a situation on its hands," and people who have seen the show chuckle or groan, because they get the joke. One of the cast members, Mike, a voluble, occasionally charming Staten Islander (only one of the eight housemates is originally from New Jersey—go figure), is so proud of his gym-cut abdominals that he calls them The Situation. The nickname, he explained on the "Tonight Show," came from an incident in a club when a couple walked by him and the woman was so captivated by his abs that she pointed at them. Mike's friends said to him, "Dude, that's a situation right there." "And I said, 'Yeah, I guess that is a situation,' and it stuck." We both do and don't know what he means—I take it to mean that his abs have magnetic qualities and that his mere appearance in a room can have tectonic consequences. In fact, Mike has synecdochically enlarged that concept to denote his entire being: The Situation isn't only what he calls his abs; it's also his nickname for himself. "I just have unbelievable mass appeal," he tells the camera in the second episode, though we've seen by then that his appeal is rather more of the niche kind.

Our ability to take any pleasure, or even interest, in shows like this—in which participants are depicted as energetic but essentially aimless, oblivious of their own deficits, and delusional about their attractiveness and their importance in the world—hinges not on our ability to identify with them but on our ability to distinguish ourselves from them. Unless the show manages to make us feel as though we were anthropologists secretly observing a new tribe through a break in the trees, it hasn't done its job. MTV has succeeded on that score; it can give itself a pat on the back for enabling viewers to feel superior to at least eight other people. (Then it can stop patting itself and slap its forehead for not having realized that nobody says "Jersey Shore," and that the title should have been "The Jersey Shore" or "The Shore." And then it can go buy a dictionary and figure out what's wrong with the following line, which appeared on the screen during the second episode, as a subtitle for what a doctor is saying to one of the housemates, who has pinkeye: "You can see where all the puss is forming.") And yet we never have to feel any guilt over our condescension, because it's so obvious that the cast members are in on the joke, too. They embrace their "Guido" identity, and insist that you don't even have to be Italian to be a Guido or—the word for the female of the species—a Guidette. (Not all of the housemates are of Italian background, as it happens.) In any case, it's something they're proud of. Mike says that "girls love Guidos." Pauly D, a d.j. from Rhode Island with an awesome straight-up hairdo that, according to him, takes about twenty-five minutes to perfect, says, "I was born and raised a Guido; it's just a life style, it's being Italian, it's representing family, friends, tannin', gel, everything." Like all reality-show participants, Pauly D, The Situation, and the others speak in categorical certainties. They know things for sure, then those things blow up in their faces, then they hate those things and take about three seconds to find new things to believe in. The series is full of lines like: "My ideal man would be Italian, dark, muscles, juicehead, Guido. If I found that guy, I'd snatch him like that"; "I am the Kim Kardashian of Staten Island, baby!"; "My only rule: Never fall in love at the Jersey Shore. Never. Ever ever ever"; and "I am the

ABOVE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER; OPPOSITE: STEVE BRODNER



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"Jersey Shore" makes us feel as though we were anthropologists secretly observing a new tribe through a break in the trees.

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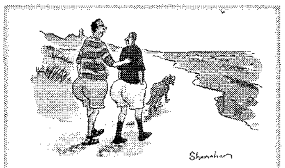

"Thanks for almost everything, Dad."
Danny Shanahan, 1999
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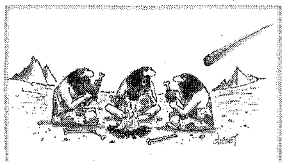

"You've got mail."
Tom Cheney, 1999
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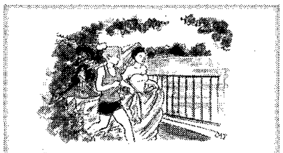

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fucking princess of fucking Poughkeepsie." (The modifiers for "princess" and "Poughkeepsie" are bleeped, but there's no doubt about what's being said. There's more swearing on TV these days than there used to be, and, at the same time, the length of the bleeps has been reduced, giving us a clear aural outline of the words to assist us in our lip reading. Like pasties in a burlesque show or thong underwear, bleeps are a saucy wink at the rules.) One housemate's characterization of her own mating habits has become a viewer favorite, and it's repeated during the credits of every episode: "I am like a praying mantis—after I have sex with a guy, I will rip their heads off." Snooki, the princess of Poughkeepsie, is a tiny and very peculiar twenty-two-year-old who is out of control in so many ways (she had the distinction of being the first housemate to overdrink and then vomit; that happened within the first twenty-four hours) that she's doomed to have her own show one day. And that's what she's angling for. She has already come up with a title: "Snookin' for Love," as she said to Conan O'Brien. Snooki (her real name is Nicole) is the woman who is punched in the face by a guy in a bar; it's an ugly scene, and MTV has milked it with cool proficiency. But we can't hold MTV responsible for Snooki's signature hair pouf—that's all Snooki's doing. It's quite a situation.

Who knows how many hours of dull footage had to be thrown away in order to get such gems? Many hundreds, I'm guessing; even the biggest narcissist needs coaching when it comes to appearing on camera. But, to a great extent, the people on the show seem to have neither underpacked nor overpacked their crazy suitcases. They knew, instinctively or consciously, what to bring: a little swearing, a little temper, a need for attention, a large bottle of immodesty, and the ability to deliver a sound bite. This makes them fascinating, though no more so than any of the other reality-show characters we've come to know in the past ten years. (Yes, my friends, it will be ten years this summer since nearly sixty million of us watched wily Richard Hatch, the first reality-show contestant to become a household name, win the million-dollar prize in the first season of "Survivor." And guess where I was that August evening? In a bleeping summer rental at the Jersey bleeping Shore, and that's a legit bleeping fact.) We're so aware of the drag on people who go on TV now: they're pulling several decades of popular culture behind them. The "Jersey Shore" housemates have a particularly heavy load, consisting of all the attitudes, looks, poses, burdens, and aromas of Italian-American culture, from "The Sopranos" back to Sinatra and including "Grease" and the Fonz and "Goodfellas." Silvio, Tony Soprano's consigliere, was known among the gang for his imitation of Al Pacino in "The Godfather: Part III"; it was a case of an Italian-American TV writer giving a fictional gangster lines that came from a real movie that was a sequel to a movie that was based on a novel that was based on real people. Then there are the further Garden State echoes. Steven Van Zandt, who played Silvio, grew up in New Jersey and is in Bruce Springsteen's band—a band that was shaped by the Jersey Shore and is now its proudest product.

So "Jersey Shore" is itself an amusement on the boardwalk at Seaside Heights, a Ferris wheel of quotation marks, and yet it really isn't fun to watch. It just goes around and around. A little digging into the concept of Guidoism brought me to an amateur documentary on YouTube. Shot last year somewhere on the Jersey Shore, it told me in less than seven minutes more about Mondo Guido than five episodes of "Jersey Shore" have. Even now, I know almost nothing about Mike, Pauly D, Snooki, and the rest of them. They're a wearying bunch, who somehow became notorious in less than a month's time, showing up on talk shows, appearing in Times Square on New Year's Eve, and—more quotation marks—making a video in which they pretend that they're proper actors who are merely playing Guido roles. On the show, they don't do anything except sleep and party and drink and hook up and spend quality time with their hair. They're a few minutes' walk from the ocean, yet we've never seen them go swimming—they just slop around in their rooftop Jacuzzi, whose presence is so central to the men's seduction rituals that it's practically a character in the show. As such, it fits right in, being both of Italian-American descent and an embarrassing reality-show cliché. ◆

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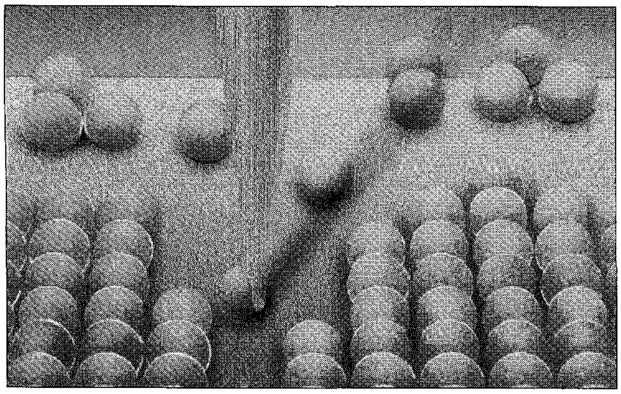

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BOOKS

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

The contemporary Arabic novel.

BY CLAUDIA ROTH PIERPONT

What do you know about how people live in Cairo or Beirut or Riyadh? What bearing does such information have upon your life? There are, of course, newspapers to keep responsible Americans up to date when trouble looms, and public television or even the History Channel to inform us about the occasional historic battle or archeological discovery or civil war. What else do we need? The ways that people think and work and suffer and fall in love and make enemies and sometimes make revolutions is the stuff of novels, and Arabic novels, while not yet lining the shelves of the local bookstore, have been increasingly available in English translation, offering a marvellous array of answers to questions we did not know we wanted to ask. On such subjects as: the nature of the clientele of the elegantly crumbling pre-Islamist bars in downtown Cairo, straight and gay ("The Yacoubian Building," by Alaa Al Aswany); what it felt like to live through the massacre in the Shatila refugee camp, in 1982, and how some of the people who still live there have been managing since ("Gate of the Sun," by Elias Khoury); the optimal tactics that a good Saudi girl should use to avoid being married off, which appear to require that she study either medicine or dentistry ("Girls of Riyadh," by the twenty-something Rajaa Alsanea, who has herself completed an advanced degree in endodontics). There is clearly insight as well as information in these books. And then, considering the reduced size and the volatility of the world we share, we might recall the essential lesson of a very old Arabic book that everyone knows, "The Thousand and One Nights"—that stories can have the power to save your life.

Our long history of indifference has made it difficult, down the years, to come by stories of Arab life that do not involve genies or magic lamps. True, the novel is a comparatively recent phenomenon in Arabic literature; poetry, an ancient art, has traditionally held wider prestige. The exciting new storytelling form, barely a century old, was adapted from the European novels that European armies brought in their wake: Napoleon's troops were in Cairo for three years, but, thanks to Egypt's Paris-worshipping nineteenth-century khedives, Balzac and Zola stayed for good. The form developed sporadically in the first half of the last century, and no more than three or four Arabic novels appeared in English before the mid-fifties. After the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize, in 1988, there was a significant surge of interest—Mahfouz himself finally got an American commercial publisher—but the burden of bringing Arabic books to English readers still falls mainly on devoted translators, and on the small and heroic presses that have performed this service from the start. Their joint efforts have rarely mattered more. The Arab reading public, although avid for all sorts of fiction, in a plethora of newspapers and cheap feuilletons, has (for evident economic reasons) not fully embraced the novel as a published book. Few Arabic novels sell enough copies to earn their authors anything like a living income; even Mahfouz kept a civil-service job until he was sixty. Today, the most sophisticated literary public is under siege. "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads" is a saying that prevailed in what now seems a dream of literary possibility, free of stifling fundamentalism, civic chaos, and bombs.

Lately, there has been a concerted effort by forces of intercultural good will, Arab and otherwise, to bring newer Arabic literary works to our attention, with annual prizes—culminating in the so-called Arabic Booker Prize, established in 2007, in Abu Dhabi—whose principal aim is to secure international (but primarily English-language) publication. From the fifties through the seventies, the United States pursued a far more extensive project: the Franklin Book Programs translated and distributed American books in the Arabic-speaking Middle East, and not only textbooks and dictionaries but "Little Women," "Ethan Frome," and "The Bridge of San Luis Rey"—books meant to promote "the Western ideals of the dignity and freedom of individual men" and to "minimize the difficulty of Arab-Western collaboration." These days, the privately sponsored Global Americana Institute is attempting to renew this sort of literary diplomacy, starting with the publication of selected essays by Thomas Jefferson in Arabic. Yet, if the goal is collaboration, isn't it as important to listen as to speak? There is little danger of encountering anything like official propaganda, since the Arab novelist stands, almost by definition—as a thinker, as a conduit of intellectual life—in opposition to the retrogressive forces in the modern Arab state.

Six years after winning the Nobel Prize, Mahfouz, aged eighty-two, was knifed in the neck by a religious zealot carrying out a fatwa issued by an Islamic cleric outraged by one of the books the Nobel committee had cited. (Mahfouz survived, and lived for two more years, although he temporarily lost the use of his right hand and had to relearn how to write. The cleric is currently serving a life sentence in the United States, for his part in a conspiracy to bomb the United Nations and other New York monuments.) Nothing so grave has happened to Alaa Al Aswany, whose "Yacoubian Building," a skillful page-turner with a winning cast of characters, takes on the subjects of class oppression, government corruption, torture in prison, the rise of fundamentalism, and the Egyptian state's propensity to push even profoundly decent but poor young men to religious extremism and, ultimately, to killing.

Published in 2002, by a private Cairo firm—there being no way to get such a manuscript through the state's official publishing house—"The Yacoubian Building" quickly became one of the biggest best-sellers that the Arab world has ever seen. In Humphrey Davies's smooth English translation (Harper Perennial; $13.95), it has been an astonishingly big seller here, too, and the book has appeared in more than twenty other languages around the globe. Al Aswany believes that his international fame has kept him safe, although he has frequently been accused in the state-run media of the crime of

حناء حضرمي
درجة أولى

Arabic novels offer a marvellous array of answers to questions we did not know we wanted to ask.

PETER ADAMS/GETTY

“tarnishing Egypt’s image abroad,” and the public discussions that he used to host at a Cairo café were shut down by the police. (He quickly relocated the discussions elsewhere.)

Even Rajaa Alsanea’s breezy “Sex and the City” takeoff, “Girls of Riyadh,” was initially banned in the author’s native Saudi Arabia, apparently for suggesting that upper-class Saudi girls might wish to escape their luxurious designer cages. The details of life within the cage have riveted non-Saudi readers, and have made the suitably hip and chirpy English translation—by the estimable Marilyn Booth, in conjunction with the author—another rare example of the Arabic novel as American best-seller. In this tight-locked cultural milieu, college girls who defy the Religious Police by wearing red on Valentine’s Day take on the sheen of political subversives.

But what about literature? Is it possible for anything like the grandly traditional novel of character development and moral nuance to emerge from societies in extremis, from writers routinely constrained or assailed? A critic reviewing Orwell’s “1984” complained that it might be truth, but it wasn’t fiction. We have, of course, come to see the novel as a form with many variant possibilities. Mahfouz, who spun complex social tales out of the apparently unquenchable vivacity of Cairo life, was able to reanimate the models of Balzac and Zola, but more recent Arab writers tend, understandably, toward Kafka or García Márquez. It should be no surprise that the prison novel has become a major Arabic genre; the icy emptiness of Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag has been replaced, in the literature of duress, with Arab writers’ crowded and sweltering cells. How could traditional fiction comprehend this reality? Whether any book will outlast its moment is impossible to say, but what follows is an account of some novels that are worth reading now, and that may prove to be worth reading even when newspapers divert our attention to wars and prisons somewhere else.

Iraq is clearly not an easy place to write a novel these days. Even the brave young blogger known as Riverbend, the author of two published collections titled “Baghdad Burning,” fled with her family to Syria in the fall of 2007, and was last heard from as she rediscovered the pleasures of walking without continuously looking behind her. The American occupation has been the subject of a number of documentary films—more documentaries have been made about Iraq than about any other active conflict, thanks to the light weight and low cost of video cameras—but the care and cogitation required for a novel (never mind the publishers and bookstores) appear to have been most obtainable among members of the far-flung Iraqi diaspora, free in foreign lands to publish works that have often been simmering for years.

Mahmoud Saeed’s “Saddam City” (translated by Ahmad Sadri; Saqi Books; $12.95) was written in the early nineteen-eighties, soon after the author was released from the last of six terms of incarceration under Saddam Hussein. Saeed left Iraq in 1985, and managed to publish his book in Syria, albeit with two chapters destroyed, in the mid-nineties. Since 1999, he has lived in the United States, and for the past few years has taught Arabic literature and calligraphy in Chicago. He is in his seventies now, with a substantial and award-winning body of work in Arabic behind him. "Saddam City," published at last in English in 2004, is based on what he saw in jail—the original Arabic title is literally "I Am the One Who Saw"—which he recorded, he says, "so that it would remain for future generations."

For all the horror it details, this is a startlingly warm and humane book. Saeed, despite the incitements of his subject, does not aspire to the Kafkaesque—Kafka, it must be admitted, is among the most impossible of authors to emulate, along with García Márquez—but maintains a specificity of place and history (*this* happened in Basra, *that* happened in Mosul) and of the individuals who inhabit them. Set mostly in the run-up to the Iran-Iraq War, in the late nineteen-seventies, this slender novel tells of a mild-mannered Basra schoolteacher who, although cautiously apolitical, is whisked off one day for "a simple interrogation." His subsequent experience in six levels of hell—six prisons in all—is exactingly described, but the long ordeal is mitigated, both for him and for the reader, by a dose of bitter humor, a share of personal good will, and the mutual trust that he discovers among the prisoners, a trust long since forfeited in the larger prison of the informer-ridden society outside.

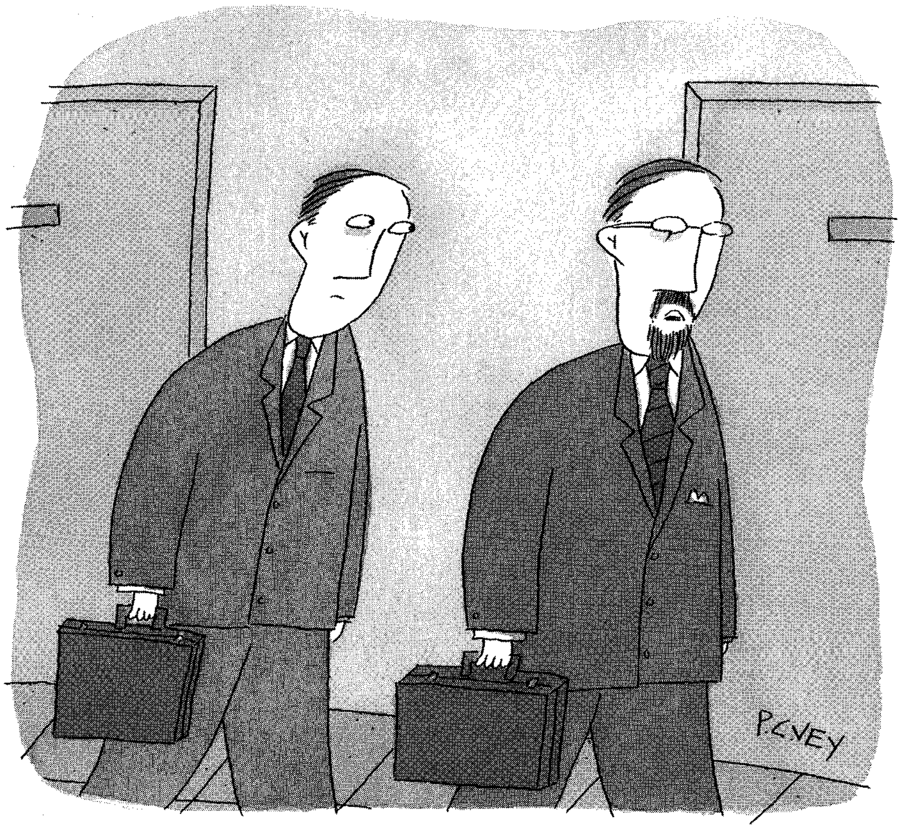
Saeed's style is plain and direct, without literary pretensions, but with a tone of emotional delicacy that is as odd in the circumstances as it is touching: treated with courtesy by a single officer, after much cruelty, the prisoner refrains from asking questions about his arrest, because "I did not want to appear to be exploiting his kindness." Some references to unfamiliar figures and events benefit from the book's tidy footnotes. And although Sadri's rendering begins stiffly, it soon becomes rhythmically fluent, and one's sense of reading a translation fades away.

Resilience against all odds appears to be characteristic of Saeed: the same force rises to a point of madcap buoyancy in "The Soldier and the Pigs," one of four Saeed stories available from Amazon.com, in uneven English, for forty-nine cents each. (A writer new to the country must try to make his work known any way he can.) In this riotously original little tale of a soldier's plight among not only pigs but many, many frogs, also set during the Iran-Iraq War, we catch another glimpse of a writer with the power to translate foreign histories into stories that we can make our own.

Sinan Antoon's "Tjaam" (City Lights; $11.95) is in many ways about translation, and although it is also an Iraqi prison novel set in the era of Saddam, it is hard to imagine a treatment of that terrible subject more different from Saeed's. Antoon is Baghdad-born, in his early forties, and he left Iraq after the first Gulf War, in 1991; he has a doctorate in Arabic literature from Harvard. "Tjaam," his first novel, was published in Beirut in 2004, and, impeccably translated by the author and Rebecca C. Johnson, appeared in English in 2007. Antoon, who currently teaches at New York University, has never been in prison. His brief novel is a self-consciously literary work, complete with references to Orwell and an epigraph from Akhmatova, and is alert to the uses of language, in a closed political society, for both indoctrination and rebellion.

The title refers to the practice of adding dots—diacritical marks—to various letters of the Arabic alphabet, some of which are indistinguishable without these marks in place. An undotted sequence of letters may signify a number of different words; the correct translation can be determined only by context. The story's intriguing premise is that a handwritten, undotted manuscript has been found in a file in Baghdad's Interior Ministry, and a functionary assigned to add the necessary dots and make a transcription: the resulting manuscript forms the body of the book. The text turns out to be the work of a university student whose gift for political mockery got him sent to prison, where he wrote the manuscript—leaving out the dots to avoid further incrimination. Its uncertain readings cause the scribe to offer footnotes to such perplexing references as "the Ministry of Rupture and Inflammation" ("Could this be the Ministry of Culture and Information?") and to such obvious errors as occur in the well-known song lyric that details how the nation's leader moves from house to house and "fucks us into bed." ("Note: the original lyrics read 'tucks.' ")

The student's (and the author's) delight in word games brightens the narrative but does not overwhelm it. At times, the prison almost disappears, as the student seeks refuge in his memories of soc-



"In an effort to be more transparent, I've grown back my evil goatee."

cer games, of campus romance, even of the mandatory political demonstrations in support of the person identified only as the Leader. Nevertheless, darkness closes in: the formerly dauntless young man, an aspiring poet, is raped by a prison guard and increasingly breaks down. In his delirium, his fantasies are alluringly, if postmodernly, alphabetical:

> The laughter rose and the dots fell, one after the other. The letters that take no dots began to pick them up from the ground and put them in their buttonholes or on their heads, or to stand on them and look at themselves in the mirror. One began to fight with the others, and stole their dots. The *sin* stole *shin's* dots and then raised its fingers to its lips, with a loud "Shhhh!" The *mim* lay down on his stomach and raised his head to swallow the two dots he had picked up off the ground. A lustful laughter swelled up, and the letters danced together, coupling in forbidden positions.

Still, the core of the experience is meant to be horribly real. Antoon has said that he required years to approach the harsher aspects of the story, implying that he feared seeming presumptuous in claiming experience not his own. What, after all, is the relevance of fact to fiction in a book like this? Should it be different from any other type of novel? There is surely a relationship between the density of detail in Saeed's book and his experience, as against Antoon's more formally focussed, internally preoccupied tone. Or is this to confound truth with style? When reality is framed and shaped by imagination—in novels, as opposed to memoirs or histories—all the truth that we can vouch for is emotional and intellectual, and on the page.

"Politics and the novel are an indivisible case," the Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani wrote. But even Kanafani, who also worked as a newspaperman and a spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, expressed the modern writer's absolute faith in the primacy of art. "My political position springs from my being a novelist," he explained. "I started writing the story of my Palestinian life before I found a clear political position or joined any organization." Born under the British Mandate, in Acre, in 1936, he was initially educated in French missionary schools, and—a fitting irony for a writer who all but invented a new national literature—he had to improve his Arabic later on. He was twelve years old when Israel was founded, in 1948, and he and his family ended up in a refugee camp in Damascus. He worked as a teacher, first in the camp and then in Kuwait for several years, before moving to Beirut to begin his association with a new political magazine and a newly stirring Palestinian consciousness. There, in 1962, aged twenty-six and in hiding for want of a passport, he wrote "Men in the Sun" (Lynne Rienner; $12.95), a novella about three Palestinian refugees who pay a smuggler to take them across a swath of the Iraqi desert to Kuwait: a work as searing as the relentless desert sun that blinds and burns the men, a work in which politics and art cannot be told apart.

"Men in the Sun" is a classic of Palestinian writing, and mentioning it among recent Arabic books is a bit like mentioning a work by Hemingway in a discussion of up-and-coming Americans, except that Kanafani remains almost entirely unknown to English readers. A few of the stories that round out the present volume are polemical and coarsely melodramatic; Kanafani was nothing if not a man with a mission. But "Men in the Sun" is, on the simplest level, a gripping tale that unfolds with Hitchcockian suspense as the reader is reduced to fearfully counting the minutes on the smuggler's wristwatch. The prose is lean, swift, and—in Hilary Kilpatrick's translation—filled with phrases of startling rightness: "The lorry, a small world, black as night, made its way across the desert like a heavy drop of oil on a burning sheet of tin"; or, even better, "The speedometer leapt forward like a white dog tied to a tent peg." The realistic intensity of Kanafani's world tends to conceal his stylistic ambitions: the intricacy with which he weaves together past and present, fact and delusion, and the alternating voices of his characters, each of whom is drawn with the rapid assurance of a charcoal sketch. But on a deeper level Kanafani's work is about the desperation that drove these men to such lengths to regain work and dignity; it is about the longing—just emerging in the Palestinian public voice—for the moist earth and the olive trees of the villages left behind in 1948. Most painfully, it is about the awakening of self-recrimination for acquiescence in the loss, as in the thoughts of an old man who has been living "like a beggar" and decides to risk the journey:

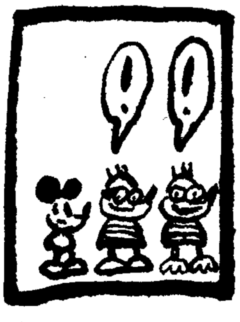
> In the last ten years you have done nothing but wait. You have needed ten big hungry years to be convinced that you have lost your trees, your house, your youth, and your whole village. . . . What do you think you were waiting for?

More than one of Kanafani's stories depict Israeli soldiers as bloodthirsty villains. Yet he also portrays Israeli settlers sympathetically—perhaps for the first time in modern Arabic literature—in the novella "Returning to Haifa," written after the 1967 war and available in another collection of his work, titled "Palestine's Children" (translated by Barbara Harlow and Karen E. Riley; Lynne Rienner; $14.95). This novella is less formally daring than "Men in the Sun"; stylistic experiment may have seemed irrelevant in the wake of the Arab defeat. But it is no less gripping, as it traces the daylong trip of a middle-aged Arab couple from their West Bank home, in 1967. The border has been newly opened, and, with much trepidation, they are travelling to see their old house in Haifa for the first time since they fled, nearly twenty years before. The elderly Jewish woman who comes to the door is anything but a stereotype: a Holocaust survivor and a widow, she is a complex and poignant figure, whose moral politics turn out to be not so far from those of her visitors. Her husband had been seduced by reading a pro-Zionist novel—"Thieves in the Night," by Arthur Koestler—into half believing that the land itself was waiting for them. She had wanted to leave almost as soon as she arrived, in 1948, upon seeing the mistreatment of an Arab child, and after realizing the cultural cost of the victory. This realization came to her the very first Saturday that she and her husband walked through newly captured Haifa:

> He was immediately struck by the fact that he didn't see any cars. It was a true Jewish Sabbath! This brought tears to his eyes for reasons he couldn't explain. When his wife saw this, she too was surprised and said to him with tears in her own eyes: "I'm crying for another reason. Yes, this is a true Sabbath. But there is no longer a true Sabbath on Friday, nor a true one on Sunday."

Yet she stayed, mostly because along with the house the childless couple were given a baby: the baby that the Arab couple left behind when the wildly fleeing Palestinian population swept them along to the port and the waiting boats. The confrontation between the now grown son, brought up by the Jewish family, and his Arab parents is the climax of the story, and what it loses in parablelike neatness it repays in emotional force. The message of generational failure and the new imperative of resistance is not so different from the message of the author's earlier work, but it is more urgent, hectoring, and stark.

This may have seemed the only possible message at the time. It is also the message of Kanafani's opposite number and comic doppelgänger, Emile Habiby. A Palestinian Christian who refused to leave Haifa after 1948, Habiby eventually served as a member of the Israeli Knesset. His own post-1967 novel, "The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist" (translated by Salma K. Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick; Interlink; $12.95), is an excruciatingly funny tour de force about "an Arab who had remained, by some magic, in Israel." Habiby's antihero, an informer for the Israeli state, is a guileless fool (the book pays tribute to "Candide") whose spinelessness is matched by his ineptitude, and who is as much a victim as a rogue. Then, one day in 1967, hearing a radio report that all defeated Arabs must surrender, he flies a white flag from his Haifa house as an "extravagant symbol of my loyalty," and is thrown in jail for insinuating that Haifa is on occupied land. Beaten and left in a cell, too ashamed to admit his identity or even where he lives, he is transformed when he is mistaken for a resistance fighter: "A fierce desire gripped me to clap my hands, to sing, to ululate and scream until the layers of necessity, silence, humiliation, and submission were all gone. It had always been 'Yes, sir!'; 'At your command, sir!' But now my spirit would fly free."



For Kanafani, there was no significant later work: he was killed in 1972, aged thirty-six, when his car was booby-trapped, apparently by Israeli security forces, in reprisal for the Popular Front's attack on an Israeli airport. Habiby died at seventy-four, in 1996, after a lifetime of arguing for the rights of Israeli Arabs; the only writer to win (and accept) important literary awards from both the P.L.O. and Israel, he chose an inscription for his tombstone that reads, whether in pride or in shame, "Remained in Haifa." Both these works by pillars of Palestinian literature, so dissimilar in every way, are at once cries from the heart and calls to arms.

Kanafani plays a recurring role in Elias Khoury's novel "Gate of the Sun" (Picador; $15), published in Arabic in 1998, to enormous acclaim, and in Humphrey Davies's award-winning English translation eight years later (thanks to the tiny, not-for-profit Archipelago Books). A tremendously ambitious work, covering half a century of Palestinian history, it begins with maps of the region dotted with the names of old Palestinian villages, the way big Russian novels begin with family trees: here, through all the narrative advance and obliteration, is what you must keep steady in your mind. Set in a dilapidated hospital in the Shatila refugee camp, in Beirut, in the mid-nineties, the book's many winding stories are told by a male Scheherazade, a fortyish Palestinian medic whose unceasing talk is intended to rouse a comatose old man, a resistance hero who spent decades sneaking over the Lebanese border into Israel, to carry out attacks that earned him the title the Wolf of Galilee. We do not see much of the attacks; instead, we see the warrior as a lover—not as the Wolf but simply as a man—paying secret visits to his wife, left behind on what has become Israeli land. As a result of these conjugal visits, the hero plants his children in Galilee, before going away again to fight to liberate them.

The medic, Khalil—an intellectual and a bit of a coward, who once memorized all of "Men in the Sun"—reports that Kanafani came to interview the old fighter once, during the nineteen-fifties, but did not find the mythic figure that he needed for his writing. It is Khoury's intent to see through an earlier age's myths, to expose the flawed and merely human at their core; this attitude lends his historical saga a contemporary feel, even while the debunking of heroism allows him to rescue, for a more cynical era, whatever sorely tested scraps of heroism remain. In true Scheherazade story-within-a-story fashion, the novel itself is foretold, in Khalil's tale of a Palestinian fighter who had planned "a book without a beginning or an end . . . an epic of the Palestinian people, which he'd start by recounting the details of the great expulsion of '48." That fighter, however, died during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, reportedly of shock—"but I'm not convinced that is the reason," Khalil confides. "I mean, after all those who were killed in fighting and in massacres, along comes someone who dies of sentiment!" It is just one of many, many signs that people dramatize, or lie, or remember things that never happened, and that stories are not to be trusted.

Elias Khoury is a Lebanese Christian who was born in Beirut in 1948, and whose sympathy for Palestinian refugees sent him to Amman to join the P.L.O.'s military unit, Fatah, in 1967, when he was nineteen. Unlike the would-be author in his book, Khoury was more a literary man than a fighter, and in the mid-seventies, back in Beirut, he took up work for the Palestine Research Center and began writing novels; during the next decade he collected thousands of stories from refugees about the "great expulsion of '48," an oral history that he felt required an "Arab Tolstoy" to wield into fiction. ("Everybody laughed," he says.) "Gate of the Sun" is indeed Tolstoyan in scope: the expulsion stories are woven through a long first section, while the second focusses on the later lives of those who fled to Lebanon only to spend whole generations in the camps. "Over there you'd become the Jews' Jews," one character observes, "and over here you were the Arabs' Arabs."

But the book is far from Tolstoyan in the telling. Its difficulties are many: the loquacious storyteller's voice at times becomes so irritating that one longs for the sick man to rise from his bed simply to make him stop talking; a strong gust of hot air blows about some truly ghastly phrases ("A woman only dies if her man stops loving her"); and the later pages (even a book without an ending must come to an end) lack energy. Moreover, Khoury's structure is a patchwork, an assembly of fragments that intersect and repeat or simply disappear. Khoury has said that this approach most accurately captures the history he writes about; it is not postmodern literary affect but the plain reality where he comes from.

As a matter of style, the point is worth debating. The Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh has written several novels about the conflict in a purely tradi-

TURKEYS

Sometimes we saw shadows of gods
in the trees; silenced, we went on.
Sometimes the dog would bound off
over the snow, into the forest.
Sometimes a tree had twenty
or more black turkeys in it, each
seeming the size of a small black bear.
We remember them for their care
for their kind ever since we watched the big hen
in the very top of the tree shaking
load after load of apples down to the flock.
Sometimes I felt I would never
come out of the woods, I thought
its deeper darkness might absorb me
or feed me to the black turkeys
and I would cry out for the dog
and the dog would not answer.

—*Galway Kinnell*

tional form. Her finest work, "Wild Thorns" (translated by Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea; Interlink; $12.95), about two Palestinian cousins who take opposing sides—one shoots an Israeli officer, the other comes to the aid of the officer's terrified wife and child—conveys the moral complexity of West Bank family life, and street life, with detailed conviction. The book is neatly plotted and easily read; it leaves us in no doubt about its characters' desperate choices and inner lives. Khalifeh, who was born in Nablus in 1941 (and continues to live there, at least for part of the year), clearly understands her subject, and knows how to tell a story. But, then, she does not attempt to trace the surging history that has led to the daily turmoil she describes.

Khoury, by contrast, is working on a grand scale, and—even while one is chafing at his methods—his repetitions and dislocations become, in an almost visceral way, part of the reader's sense of exile and, ultimately, part of the book's rewards. If few of the characters are sufficiently sustained to carry our emotions over the long haul, there are many passing characters whose stories come to unforgettable life. I threw this book aside several times on first reading, but the power of these stories drew me back. "Gate of the Sun" is, as it turns out, worth reading twice—because it is so hard to see whole the first time, and because it is so insidiously rich.

There is Salim, who was five years old when, as he recalls, his mother carried him through the fire at the siege of Shatila (" 'There wasn't a fire,' I said") and is now learning English so that he can follow her to America, although everyone knows that she died in the siege. There is Abu Aref, a Bedouin who went off one day with his family's herd of buffalo and returned saying that the Israelis had killed them, but whose wife knew that they had really been stolen by his cousin, and that he'd invented the buffalo massacre to cover his shame. ("Everything foolish we do," she says, "we blame on the Jews.")

And there are the human massacres, in Palestinian villages, in 1948, by Israeli troops: in Ain al-Zaitoun, forty young men were slaughtered; in al-Safsaf, sixty men were executed wearing the white sheets they had worn to surrender; in Sha'ab, twenty old men were forced to march in the mud and nineteen died. The list goes on. The villages are real, the dates are real, and while some of the wildest embellishments are shown to be false—a crucifixion, most notably—the stories are told in the voices of those who were there, or those who heard the stories from them. The Israeli historians Ilan Pappé and Benny Morris have presented irrefutable evidence that atrocities occurred during the founding of the Israeli state, although arguments persist about the accuracy of reports, responsibility for actions, and degrees of brutality. When "Gate of the Sun" was published in Hebrew, in 2002, it won critical praise but was also severely criticized for mixing fact with incendiary fiction—because such stories, even in a novel that insists on the unreliability of stories, have the sound of reality and bear its charge. Khoury has countered that his book presents the truth, wholly inarguable, of Palestinian memory and belief.

Khoury was attacked in the Egyptian press for allowing his book to be published in Israel, although this seems to have been one of his goals: he has said that, in a metaphorical sense, he wrote the book not only in Arabic but in Hebrew. A self-confessed secular democrat, Khoury is one of the few Arab writers to recognize the Holocaust as part of the moral equation in the Middle East. Khalil, when talking about the Palestinian revolts of the late nineteen-thirties, demands of his ever-silent foil, "What did the nationalist movement posted in the cities do apart from demonstrate against Jewish immigration? . . . Tell me, in the faces of people being driven to slaughter, don't you see something resembling your own?" In 2001, Khoury signed a statement opposing the holding of a Holocaust-denial conference in Beirut. Both the author and his character make their arguments in terms of keeping Arab culture free of soul-destroying European-style racism, and of preserving a larger moral dignity. It is crucial to have stood up to such a terrible history, and to face it in the present, "not because the victims were Jews," Khalil says, "but because their death meant the death of humanity within us."

For all its large ideas and its high-flown rhetoric, the novel's most substantial character is the hero's pragmatic wife, who turns both the nationalist epic and the great love story upside down when, after years of lightning visits by her husband, she makes it clear just who the true Palestinian hero is. It was she who fed and brought up their children, she who was in charge of the "ordinary and meaningless" details that allowed them all to survive. Now she has decided that the children will not spend their lives waiting for their

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lives to begin, as she has done: "I want the illusions to end." She has become an Israeli citizen. She votes for the Arab Communist Party in the Knesset, "and I attend the meetings and demonstrations, in an attempt to preserve what's left of our land." She will raise the money for one of their sons to open a garage in the village. A daughter will get the wedding that she wants. Another son will receive his master's degree, in Arabic literature, from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and begin his doctoral thesis on the works of Ghassan Kanafani.

Seven children in all. And, eventually, twenty-five grandchildren, about whom the Wolf of Galilee, giving the story one more twist, has the final word:

> Here we are, thrown out of our country in '48, and with only a hundred thousand of us left over there. The hundred thousand have become a million, and the eight hundred thousand who were thrown out have become five million. They bring in immigrants and we have children, and we'll see who wins in the end.

George Orwell claimed that in a peaceful age he would have been not a political writer but, rather, an author of "ornate or merely descriptive books" (which lets us know what he really thought of nonpolitical writing). In America, where authors enjoy the right to be as ornate or descriptive as they wish, the political necessity that drives so many Arab writers may seem like a literary ball and chain. It is, of course, possible to find Arabic works about other subjects. Curiously, both of the Arabic Bookers awarded so far have gone to Egyptian historical novels: Bahaa Taher's "Sunset Oasis" (translated by Humphrey Davies; McClelland & Stewart; $34.99), a solid, if stolid, piece of work that gains its interest mostly from being set in Egypt's Siwa Oasis, during the late nineteenth century, and ends—just when we thought we were getting away from such things—with someone blowing something up; and Yusuf Zeydan's "Beelzebub," not yet translated, which is set in the relative safety of the fifth century A.D. But it isn't necessary to escape our time in order to be free of politics; geographic distance can have the same effect, particularly in lands so vast and thinly populated. Go far enough and you can escape the entire modern world, as in the Libyan Tuareg writer Ibrahim al-Koni's desert fable "Gold Dust" (translated by Elliott Colla; American University in Cairo; $17.95), in which a man trades his wife and son for a beloved camel, and the engrossed reader feels no doubt that he has chosen well.

Despite the continued existence of such pristine literary realms, there is some fear that the lure of English translation and American publication is a corrupting force—that Arab novelists, consciously or not, will begin to court the larger market, and leave their own audiences behind. As for us, we would end up reading only versions of what we want to hear. There is not much evidence that anything like this has happened yet, and the benefits for all seem to outweigh the risks. Alaa Al Aswany's second novel, "Chicago" (translated by Farouk Abdel Wahab; Harper Perennial; $14.99), set amid Egyptian émigrés in that city, where the author went to graduate school, attempts to deal with both worlds, and comes down as hard on America for sustaining Egyptian tyranny as on Egyptian tyranny itself. It is, frankly, a disappointing book, in that the author's typically ambitious reach proves beyond his grasp. Nevertheless, Al Aswany's reputation and his undeniable storytelling ease have made "Chicago" the biggest Arabic best-seller since his first novel, and have won it many readers—frustrated, thinking, caught up—in the West as well.

Certainly, not every part of this literary exchange will be ideal. There will be good books and not so good ones, just as with American fiction. Still, it is unquestionably good to have stories that we hold in common. And it would be better to have more. Nobody is under the illusion that literature can change the world. But, as Al Aswany has pointed out, "literature does something much more important—it changes us." Contemporary Arabic literature—which is not a monolithic literature but a series of imaginative works by individuals who happen to be Egyptian, Libyan, Syrian, Moroccan, Lebanese, and so on, twenty-two nations strong—is one of the few reliable forces working to impel these varied countries toward a cultural (and perhaps even a political) openness, in which Arab writers will one day be able to write about anything at all. ♦

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A conversation with Claudia Roth Pierpont.

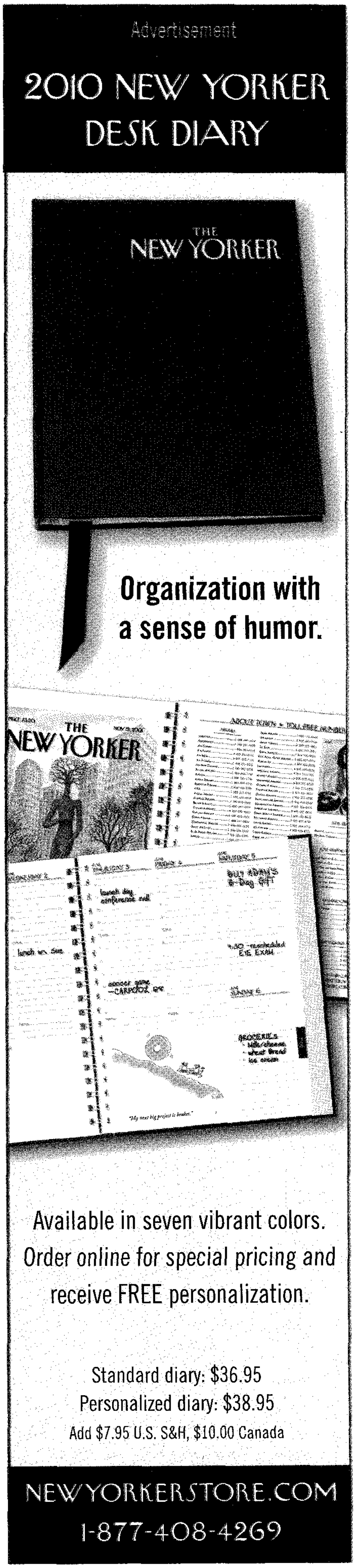
BRIEFLY NOTED

The Unnamed, *by Joshua Ferris (Reagan Arthur/Little, Brown; $24.99).* In Ferris's febrile second novel, a man's charmed life (law-firm partnership, suburban manse, wife "still beautiful" at age forty-six) is derailed by a mysterious illness that compels him to walk for hours, heedless of direction or weather, until he loses consciousness. The narrative's perambulations are similarly erratic, with bursts of action giving way to longueurs, and the first half of the book reads like a shaggy-dog story, hobbled by a distracting murder subplot. But the second half is a stunner, an unnerving portrait of a man stripped of civilization's defenses. Ferris's prose is brash, extravagant, and, near the end, chillingly beautiful. The hero imagines his ravaged body jeering at him: "For all your higher plane and beloved evolution . . . you want the old comforts and narratives . . . the great words repeated in the dark and over the heads of newborns and the bodies of the dead."

Then Came the Evening, *by Brian Hart (Bloomsbury; $25).* When Bandy Dorner returns to Lake Fork, Idaho, after eighteen years behind bars, he finds the former mill town transformed into a vacation retreat for affluent outsiders: "He wondered where these new people had come from and for what reason they chose his valley." The city jail is now a historical museum, and his childhood home has been renovated beyond recognition by his former lover and a son Bandy never knew he had. Like the characters in this quietly exceptional début novel, the author is an Idaho native, and an astute observer of the transitional Western landscape. "The same thing always happens," he writes. "You run out of trees, you run out of rocks, or you run out of room."

Americans in Paris, *by Charles Glass (Penguin; $32.95).* A vivid gallery of expatriates animates this chronicle of Paris during the Second World War. Drawing heavily on primary source material, Glass narrates the Nazi Occupation year by year, unfolding stories of resilience and despair: Sylvia Beach, the proprietor of Shakespeare & Company, refuses to sell her last copy of "Finnegans Wake" to a German officer; Dr. Sumner Jackson, the chief surgeon at the American Hospital, allows his fifteen-year-old son to go on a harrowing spy mission. The saga of Charles Bedaux, a French-born millionaire who worked with the Germans on pipeline and railway projects in French Africa, culminates in the suicide note he composed after being charged with treason. By focussing with exhaustive thoroughness on a relatively small group, Glass is able to capture the complex stories of "as diverse a collection of opposed beliefs and backgrounds as in any American metropolis."

A Gambling Man, *by Jenny Uglow (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $35).* When Charles II became King of England, in 1660, his task was daunting: to restore the authority of the monarchy while courting a fractious parliament. Uglow's vivid history of the first decade of his reign shows how boldly Charles embraced the openness and experimentation of the Age of Reason. He argued for religious tolerance, encouraged the proceedings of the Royal Society, indulged the libertine wits who frequented his court, patronized Hobbes, attempted to patronize Milton (who refused), and transformed the palace at Whitehall into, as Pepys lamented, a bastion of "gaming, swearing, whoring and drinking, and the most abominable vices that ever were in the world." But, after setbacks and political intrigues, Charles closed himself off, operating more and more through calculated manipulation. A secret treaty with France, in 1670, in which he pledged to convert to Catholicism for two hundred thousand pounds, "marked the end of all the experiments."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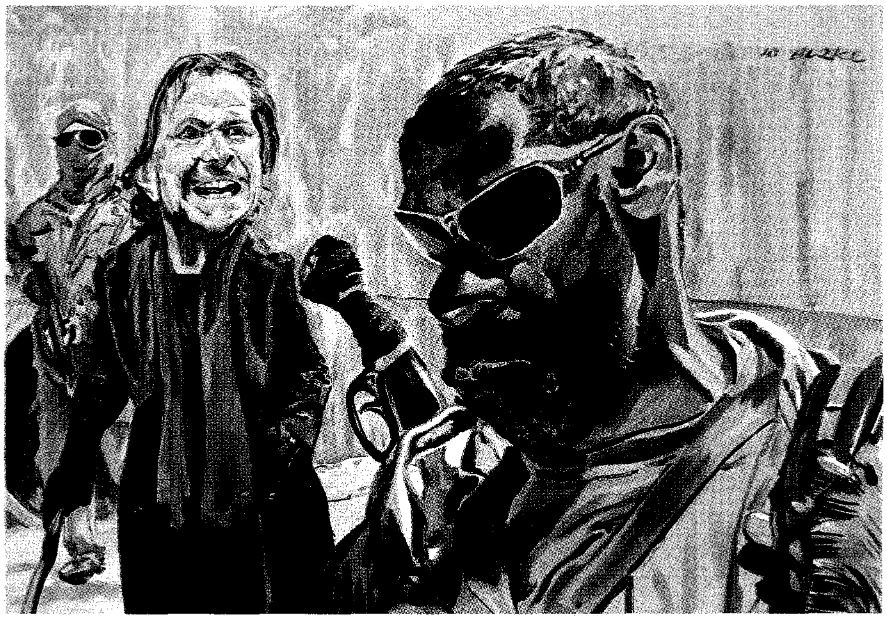
WASTELANDS

"The Book of Eli" and "Fish Tank."

BY DAVID DENBY

Among the more bizarre responses to "Avatar," James Cameron's blue-green bliss-out, is the complaint, from several conservatives, that the movie fails to devote itself to a Christian narrative. Ross Douthat, in the *Times*, deplored its celebration of "pantheism" and the absence of redemption. Jonah Goldberg, of *National Review*, longed for "a movie in which the good guys accepted Jesus Christ into their hearts." Rupert Murdoch, who yields nothing to these men in conservative values, may nevertheless be relieved that neither of them is running Twentieth Century Fox, which he controls, and which co-financed and distributed "Avatar," a movie that may become the most lucrative ever made. In any case, Douthat and Goldberg can now rest, since the search for redemption is over. "The Book of Eli," directed by the Hughes Brothers, has arrived.

We're back on the road. Denzel Washington plays a post-apocalyptic warrior, Eli, who has been walking west for thirty years through a devastated landscape, carrying a sole book, the Bible. (Out West, he believes, there is hope.) Along the way, he fights off cannibals, marauding motorbikers, and other persons with blackened teeth and burnt faces. It seems that years ago there was a war, and then a "flash"; the ozone layer was destroyed, and the sun "came down" and dried up everything. Nothing remains but howling wind, ruined cities, desert wastes, leafless trees. Almost every book has disappeared, too; Eli was led to the Bible by a "voice" that took possession of him. Among the human dregs Eli comes into contact with, only one, Carnegie (Gary Oldman), a crime boss who runs the brothel and the saloon in a half-wrecked small town, knows the value of Scripture. He doesn't know what's *in* the Bible, but he thinks that he can become a dictator by reading it and spreading the Word. Eli wants to spread the Word, too, but in the interest of faith and renewal. Carnegie is satanic (the Cross makes him shrink away), Eli a prophet. A bulletproof prophet, as well—slugs bounce off his back like spitballs. He gets help from Carnegie's blind mistress (Jennifer Beals) and her daughter, Solara (Mila Kunis), who, amid the general filth and dereliction, walks around the desert in shades, high boots, and flowing hair, as if she were a starlet roaming through West Hollywood.



Gary Oldman and Denzel Washington in a movie by the Hughes Brothers.

PHILIP BURKE

"The Book of Eli" is not as lethally boring as "The Road," but it has the same dour skies and a color range that runs from cinnamon to liver. We seem to have been cursed with a new kind of film: the brown-and-white movie. What's so appealing to filmmakers about these post-apocalyptic tales, anyway? In the past decade or so, the world has been meteored, quaked, lavaed, nuked, melted, frozen, Godzillaed, and repeatedly turned into New Jersey or New Mexico, and sometimes, as in "Eli," both places in the same movie. The dog-eat-dog lesson has been drilled into us again and again, and I'm beginning to wonder if filmmakers aren't using the world's end as a trope to license a neo-primitivist ethos. When people must scavenge just to survive, any kind of violence is justified. Eli carries the Word by means of the sword. He slices up many people with a curved, medium-length blade—a sort of industrial-age scimitar—that he wields (in silhouette, so we can't see much) like a samurai. Eli is most ominous, however, when he whispers, gently, slowly, into some meatball's ear that he's going to kill him, and then inserts the blade. In this religio-exploitation picture, Washington maintains a solemn kind of cool, while Oldman, smirking and roaring, keeps the show alive as the ambitious entrepreneur who reads biographies of Mussolini. Camping, he at least seems to know that he's in an impossibly daft movie.

"People kill each other now for things we used to throw away," Eli says to Solara. By that, he means everyday goods, like matches and towelettes, so I guess the picture can be read as an attack on rampant consumerism and self-indulgence. The lesson is: We've been bad, very bad, and we had it coming. And now we're being punished by watching a brown-and-white movie. The script, by Gary Whitta, was not so much written as revealed. Yet Whitta is confused. No one could attack the importance he attaches to the book of books, but it's not clear why he thinks that the Bible will lead to renewal, since the previous civilization had the Bible, too, and still destroyed itself. "The Book of Eli" combines the maximum in hollow piety with remorseless violence. It's a true American commercial product, overflowing with barbarous acts and improving bromides.

When Mia (Katie Jarvis), the fifteen-year-old British working-class heroine of "Fish Tank," speaks, she lowers her head as if butting someone. "Fuck" is the universal locution in her family, and hip-hop slang—a little out of date, but still potent—shapes the rest of her talk, all of it delivered with a peculiarly English tartness, as if life at any moment could be defined by a phrase. Katie Jarvis was discovered on a railroad platform, arguing with her boyfriend; she had never acted before, and she doesn't modulate her voice as a trained actress would. At seventeen, tall and slender and wide-eyed, she holds nothing back. Mia, it turns out, is up against a lot. Her alcoholic mother, a sultry blond beauty whose face is turning back to baby fat, is grabbing at what may be her last days of pleasure, and she barely opens a can to make dinner for her children. And Mia's young sister, a tiny bawd, says such things as "I like you. I'll kill you last." Mia lives in a housing project in Essex, east of London, and there's nothing resembling a social structure in sight, just ugly apartment buildings, an elevated highway, abandoned lots, and scraggly meadows. School is out of the question for Mia. Yet the movie that arises from this spiky desolation has a heady, fighting spirit to it. Mia has never had a break (and doesn't give one to anyone else), but she's bright and responsive, and the director, Andrea Arnold, moves the camera with her everywhere, racing down steps behind her, traipsing alongside her on the street. Perhaps because we're physically so close to Mia, and because she's so obviously needy and lovelorn—she lies and steals, yet she's no more than two steps from grace—we're with her all the way.

A thirtyish man named Connor (Michael Fassbender), handsome and confident, enters the household as Mia's mother's new boyfriend. He immediately turns a friendly eye on Mia, too. We aren't told where he comes from, or what his situation is, but he fits right in, treating Mia as if he knew instinctively that she needed a father. Fassbender, of German-Irish parentage, played the British film critic turned anti-Nazi fighter in "Inglourious Basterds" and the emaciated I.R.A. martyr Bobby Sands in "Hunger." He was remarkably unnerving in that film, and after an hour of his actorly fanaticism I couldn't wait for Sands to expire. This time, playing a sexy Everyman, smiling and shirtless, Fassbender is a star presence. And a fearless actor. Connor goes too far with Mia, and Fassbender gives us a fascinating mixture of lust and guilt. The movie is a kind of downscale variation on "An Education." Again, an older man pursues a teen-age girl, though this time there's a stronger candidate her own age for her affections: Billy (Harry Treadaway), a skinny nomad hanging around the neighborhood, who's shy and inarticulate but mysteriously unafraid of snarling Mia.

There's a recurring ambition in the cinema—it shows up every year—to strip away artifice, to dispose of sets and polished performance and "style," and to directly embrace what the filmmaker imagines is the truth. Cinéma-vérité documentaries of the nineteen-sixties; John Cassavetes's nattering, semi-improvised features of the sixties and seventies; the more recent Brit-realist films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh—filmmakers are always looking for spontaneity and authenticity. Some of us might argue that "the truth" is itself just a different kind of style, though there are certainly techniques that blast through pretense and guardedness.

Arnold doesn't rely on improvisation; she employed a strategy of not giving actors the entire script or telling them where the story was going. Shooting the movie in sequence, they worked only with the situations and lines they needed for each day. From scene to scene, "Fish Tank" has a volatile sense of discovery. Fassbender is canny enough to hold himself in, but the others go all out, as if there were no tomorrow (which, as actors without the rest of the script, they may have actually felt). Arnold, of course, knew where the story was headed, and I think she achieved what she wanted—to convey a sense that the narrative would break apart at any moment even as it was sailing, not serenely but steadily, toward its destination. "Fish Tank" may begin as a patch of lower-class chaos, but it turns into a commanding, emotionally satisfying movie, comparable to such youth-in-trouble classics as "The 400 Blows." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

The Front Row, a blog about movies.

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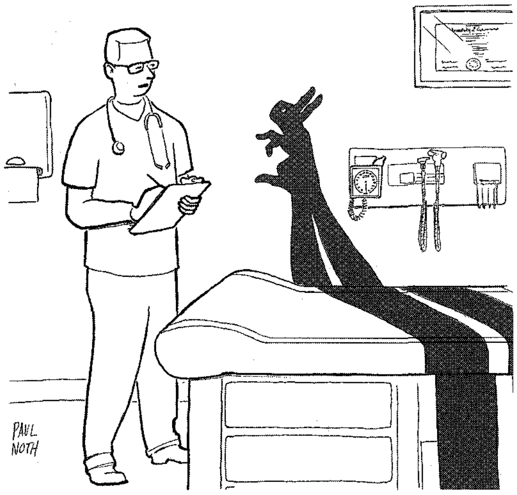
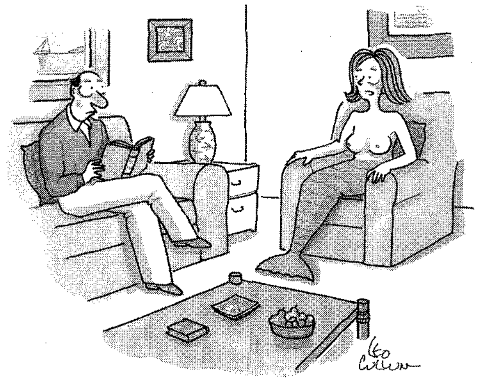
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Frank Cotham, must be received by Sunday, January 17th. The finalists in the January 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 1st issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the U.S. or Canada (except Quebec) age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Avoid direct sunlight."
Emily Wurtz, Chevy Chase, Md.



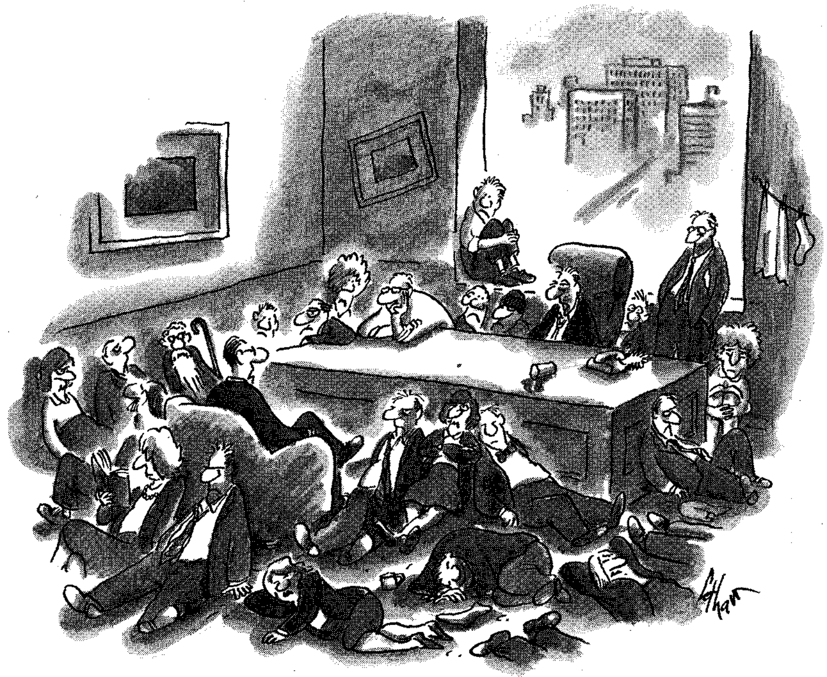
THE FINALISTS

"I feel like seafood tonight."
Mike Sellers, Newtown, Pa.

"I don't want to hear again about the one that got away."
Jo Minow, Chicago, Ill.

"And what does she have that I don't?"
Christo Phillips, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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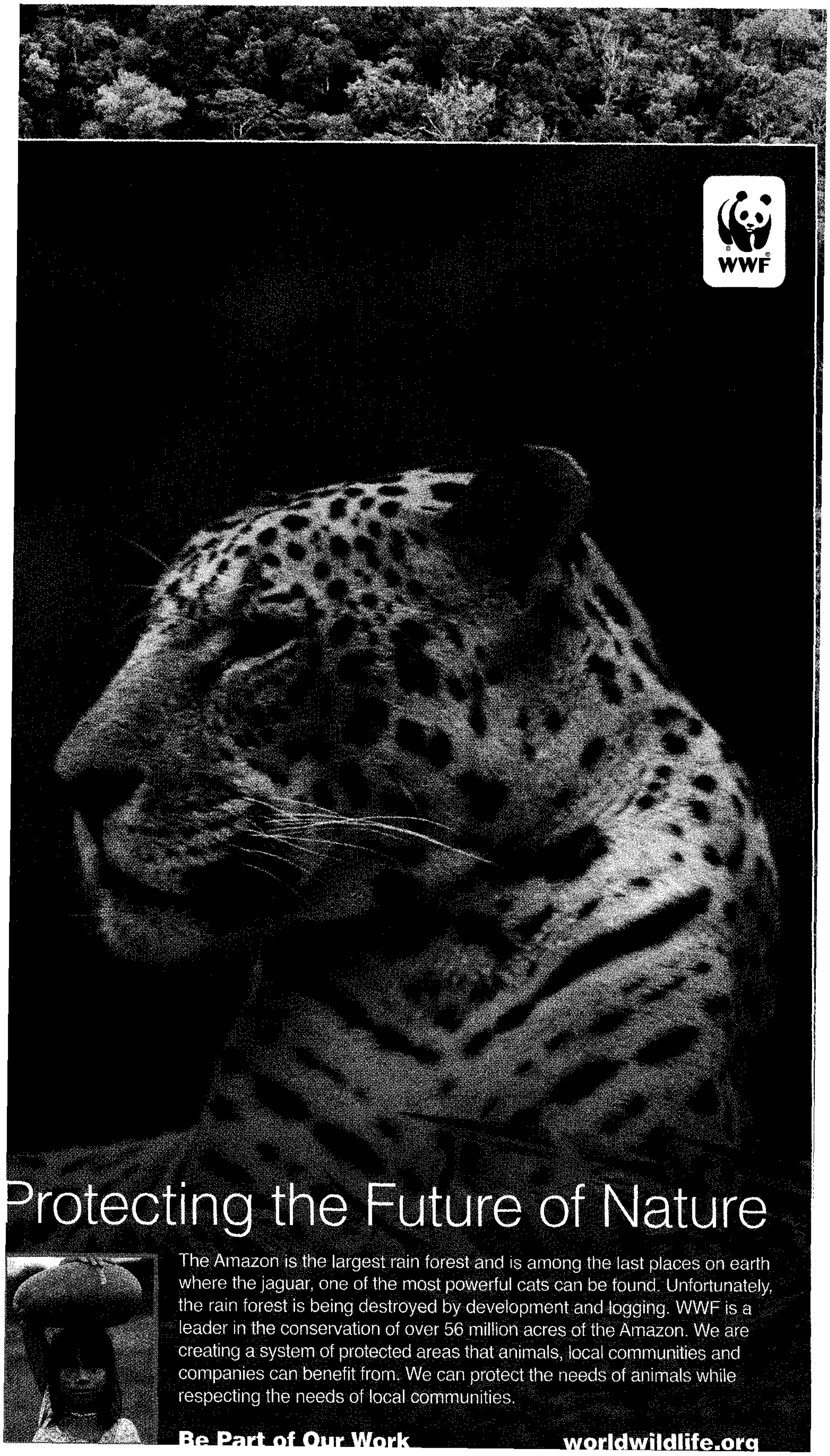

Protecting the Future of Nature

The Amazon is the largest rain forest and is among the last places on earth where the jaguar, one of the most powerful cats can be found. Unfortunately, the rain forest is being destroyed by development and logging. WWF is a leader in the conservation of over 56 million acres of the Amazon. We are creating a system of protected areas that animals, local communities and companies can benefit from. We can protect the needs of animals while respecting the needs of local communities.

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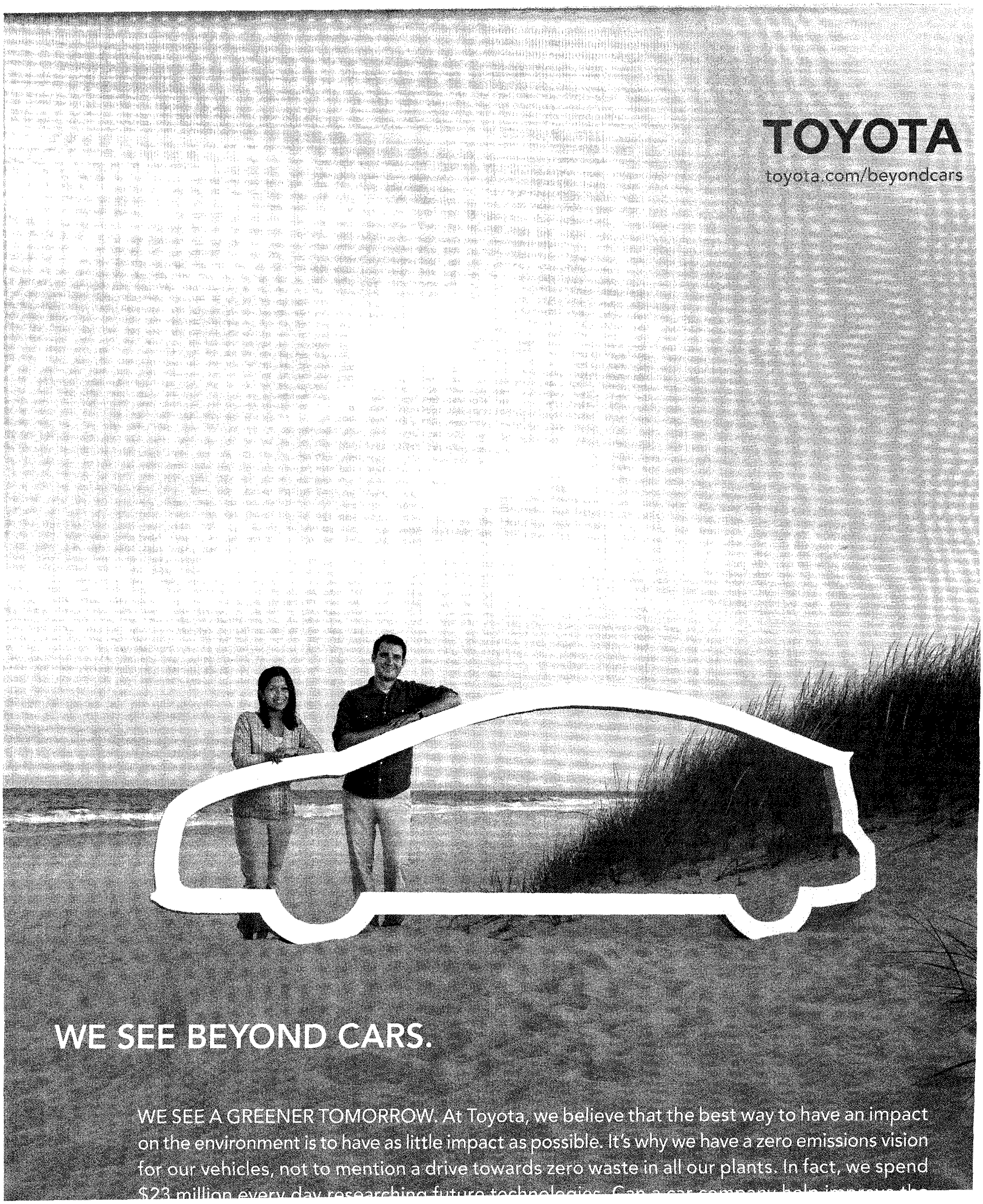

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